

A/N:

I put this disclaimer up once and it applies to THIS ENTIRE WORK:

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There will be large chunks of canon material where I have made minor adjustments and changes to fit with my story as I am rewriting JKR's work to suit my taste, style and preferences. So that obviously belongs to her.

There were accusations of plagiarism for a draft of this fanfiction (first two chapters were uploaded) when I was gauging interest and whether this would be worth writing. I crossed checked and found there were a number of similarities between my fanfiction and Robst's "Can't Have It Both Ways." I HAVE his permission to use the general idea and a few specific ones/scenes as well. Therefore: My heartfelt thanks and gratitude to Robst for letting me take his general idea/plot and run with it in my own direction.

Triwizard Warfare.

Chapter 1

Goblets of Revelations

"I didn't put my name in that Goblet!" said Harry, starting to feel angry.

"Yeah. Ok," said Ron, in exactly the same skeptical tone as Cedric, "Only you said this morning you'd have done it last night, and no one would've seen you ... I'm not stupid you know."

"You're doing a really great impression of it," snapped Harry.

"Yeah?" said Ron, and there was no trace of a grin, forced or otherwise, on his face now. "You want to get to bed, Harry, I expect you'll need to be up early tomorrow for a photo call or something."

He wrenched the hangings shut around his four-poster, leaving Harry standing there by the door, staring at the dark red velvet

curtains; now hiding one of the few people who he thought would believe him. Harry's patience ran out on him at that moment, "If you're not stupid, then you're the best actor in the wizarding and muggle worlds combined, because every professor is convinced you're a dumb ass!"

Harry ripped the Gryffindor banner that someone had draped around his shoulders like a cape and tossed it on his bed. Seconds later, both the banner from his shoulders and the one spread across his bed were banished across the room. He knew that the party would continue for hours and he was not going to get to sleep any time soon - not that sleep would come soon for the very troubled teenager. Everything that had gone on tonight, got him wondering, and worried about whether he would ever get to experience the "normal" life that a teenager was supposed to get. This year, it was clear, was already shaping up to be one where "normal" would mean a growth in his fame or infamy.

After his name had come out of the Goblet of Fire, Hermione had stamped on his foot twice and then had to literally push him out of his seat. The gathered students of Hogwarts, Beauxbatons and Durmstrang were all fixated on him, with a mix of surprise, disbelief, hatred, and anger in varying quantities. The face that stood out, and perhaps hurt the most was that of Cho Chang. Even if he would only admit it to himself in the deepest darkest of holes, on the loneliness of nights, her expression had crushed all romantic notions. In all likelihood, she would date one of the Dementors of Azkaban before going out with him.

Only his alleged family had been able to give him those kinds of looks. Add to that Fleur Delacour scathing remark about him being a "little boy," Harry almost wished the ground would have just opened up and swallowed him whole. Then his best mate had called him a liar. Harry found himself wondering whether he would survive the night, let alone the rest of the school year.

However, there was a slim ray of hope. No matter what insanity he was a part of, from three headed dogs and trolls to freeing Azkaban convicts; one girl he had always been interested in had stood by his side. More significantly, he had not seen her at the celebration in his honor. Ron had broken two friendships and in the process shattered Gryffindor's Golden Trio. Harry was not too sure what to make of that, but he did admit that things were suddenly a lot easier. She

had stood by him for almost three years, through it all, providing good advice whenever she could. He knew he would need her more than ever: His first last and only hope of surviving the tournament. If she refused... well there was hope that the first task would kill him.

Sunday saw him rise early, as had been his habit since the summer holidays as he descended the spiral staircase and in to the grounds of Hogwarts, to continue his pattern of running and working out. He'd started during the summer, partly to give him something to do, partly to help him evade Dudley and his gang, who's favorite summer past time was still "Harry Hunting." Those were not the only reason he reminded himself grimly. The next time, he had the opportunity, any opportunity Peter Pettigrew was going to pay. He bypassed the Great Hall, not bothering to slow down as he jogged his way past the arched double doors.

The common room was like his dorm deserted and he took his time, after his morning workout, the heat of the shower worked out some of the cramps and aches after having pushed himself a little too hard. By the time he was clean, dressed, exited the portrait hole, and moments from congratulating himself on escaping the Gryffindor common room without incident when he collided with the witch he was hoping to find. The flask of pumpkin juice was all right, but the toast wound up getting somewhat flattened between them.

It was the simplicity of the gesture. Where others had gone out of their way, throwing parties, slapping him on the back, and offering congratulations, all it took was a stack of maligned toast and juice, "Hermione... Thanks."

Many called her the brightest witch of the age. She smiled sweetly, "Don't worry Harry, I figured you wouldn't want to go anywhere near the great hall this morning." A mouthful of toast kept him quiet as she quickly brought him up to speed on things, "The Hufflepuffs think you stole their thunder, Cho is Cedric's girlfriend and turned Ravenclaw against Gryffindor – well you specifically. Slytherin... Slytherin would rather see Fleur, Victor, even Cedric win. Anyone but Harry Potter," she hesitated, "As it is, nearly all of Gryffindor will stand with you."

Harry knew whom one of those who would not stand with him was, and he probably was not the only one, just the only one honest enough to voice and stand by his incorrect opinion, "Yeah but they

think it, even if they won't say that I cheated my way in to the competition."

"Harry, one look at your face last night and I knew you didn't put your name in that goblet, and anyway you know you can't keep secrets from me. I've already started work on a training schedule, researching what spells could be useful..."

Harry tossed his juice aside, as he pulled Hermione in to a hug, silencing the young witch. They finished with their foreheads resting against one another as Harry fought to get himself under control before speaking, "Thank you. I just don't know what else to say... and those two words, they aren't enough..." Something clicked, for both of them, inside, on the metaphorical other deeper and more important level. He leant in to her, and she did not resist.

Hermione Jane Granger had been dreaming for at least a year about this kiss. Not kissing Harry per se, but more along what it would be like to get kissed by someone who was attracted to her, not intimidated or scared of her intellect and quite possibly even loved her. That the boy in question was Harry Potter was another thing entirely. She had fallen for him, a crush, that she kept hidden, not willing to risk their friendship over it. Now, suddenly she was kissing him, he was kissing her and it left her feeling as if she had just been obliviated, and she loved it. Everything was suddenly, inexplicably right with the world. She kissed him again, just to make sure she was not having some daydream, "Harry James Potter," she teased, "If you think I would let anyone but my boyfriend kiss me then you don't know me very well."

He blushed, "Your boyfriend for as long as you'll have me," he whispered softly. She broke in to a smile and then a giggle as he suddenly lifted her off her feet and spun her round in a circle, staggering a little to both the left and then the right, away from the portrait entrance to Gryffindor tower, as the Fat Lady smirked at the sight. "Well, it's about time." The self-satisfied smirk seemed to linger in the frame as she wandered off to spread the news to the castle's otherworldly residents.

Her heart melted at the expression on Harry's face. She had seen him laugh, smile, and even joke around a little in the years that she had known him, but she had never ever seen him, so happy, so at peace with the world. Calm happiness, mirrored in his eyes that

echoed a love and concern that she just instinctively knew meant he would never do anything to hurt her. Harry led her through the castle, and she had figured out their destination, "Hermione I promise you'll know everything I do; I just want us to have a quiet place to discuss things, without having to worry about anyone walking in. He lead her down to the first floor bathroom: The haunt of Moaning Mrytle who was sobbing in the U bend of her toilet, ignoring all who came, much like the pair who entered and then opened the Chamber of Secrets with a hiss of parseltongue. He blinked for a moment, and hissed something else. Hermione blinked, as stairs appeared, "Didn't think of that last time."

The descended just enough for them to seal the entrance behind them, their wands lighting their way as she finally rounded on her boyfriend, "I've been a good little girlfriend and we can't be heard, let alone found down here," if there had been any ambiguity, she dispelled it, "Spill!"

"After my name came out of the goblet last night, the adults in the room all agreed that I was being setup. And not for something good either," she rolled her eyes - that much was obvious, "They all had opinions and ideas but nobody seemed to give a damn about mine!" his fist slammed in to the stone wall with a thud as the words came tumbling out a wave of recrimination and damnation, "Everyone who's supposed to be looking after me, watching out for my safety and welfare has failed. And it doesn't seem like they're going to do anything other than leave me as a sacrificial lamb," his laugh was mirthless, "'I'll give you one guess though..." she did not need that one guess. She knew: Voldemort.

Hermione did the only thing she could do, wrapping her arms around his waist, just holding him as she tried her best to reassure him, "You, don't have to do this alone. I already told you that I would help you in any way I could. Spells, research, whatever I can, to help you get what you want."

"What I want," he somehow turned to face her without either of them letting go, "is to get out of this tournament, and just have a normal year, as a teenager without problems without fighting for the wizarding world, or being the target of a lunatic or something." Hermione was suddenly very worried. Even more worried than she had been when his name had first emerged from the Goblet the night before, "Beyond you, I don't know who to turn to for help," he

whispered in to her hair wondering if it was her shampoo or her that had the scent of wild flowers.

She stood and wondered, pondered and worried, "I have an idea," she said slowly, heading off his most obvious guess, "Dumbledore was there last night and you told me he wants you to compete in this tournament, to smoke out whoever set you up in the first place. That means that rest of the staff will probably fall in right behind him. I think," she hesitated for a moment before forging ahead, "we should go to Gringotts."

"Gringotts?" he gawked at her, "The bank?" the piece fell in to place, "The Goblins?"

She nodded, "They know a great deal about Wizarding Law, because of all the work that they do with and for Wizards. They also know who you are and how famous you are. I think they would help you, just to aggravate the Ministry."

"What? Why?"

"Goblin – Wizard relations have been poor for several decades now. Even when the Ministry handed control of the bank back to the Goblins after the First War, they felt that their honor and integrity was questioned by not just the Ministry but tarnished in the eyes of every other branch of Gringotts all over the world. Gringotts and the Ministry have been at odds ever since." She explained an expression of amusement on her face at his somewhat dumbfounded expression, "I do pay attention in History of Magic you know."

"You'd be the one, Hermione," he smiled, taking any sting out of the words, "You'd be the only one." He hesitated for a moment, "Do you have any idea how we're going to get to London? It's too far to fly on a broom," Hermione shuddered at the suggestion, "and somehow, I don't think we'd get permission to go even if I asked Dumbledore."

Neither of them could create a portkey and they were definitely too young to apparate, but the solution was simple, elegant, and obvious once they gave the matter some thought: Owl. A few hours of research on the few tomes regarding Goblin culture and etiquette and Hedwig took to the skies with the carefully worded letter. Now

all they had to do was wait, and somehow survive the anger of three houses, two foreign magic schools and an angry Ronald Weasley.

Despite the incredible depths of Gringotts, the Owls always knew exactly where to turn and fly to navigate the vastness of the bank that went deep underground. The Snowy Owl named Hedwig, knew exactly where to find the recipient of the letter tied to her ankle. She hooted quietly, to draw the Goblin's attention Griphook blinked, and stretched out his arm, letting the owl. The owl gave him a simple dignified nod that would not have been out of place on a politician currying favor with a financial backer. Griphook grinned and reached in to his pocket for a scrap of meat jerky that he shared with the Owl who now rested on the edge of his desk. The Goblin had risen through the ranks since he had escorted the eleven-year-old boy to his vault for the first time.

Greetings Honored Griphook.

May your gold forever multiply as your enemies suffer horrible death upon your blade. I, Harry James Potter, wish to call upon the aid of Gringotts in resolving my involuntary participation in the Ministry of Magic Organized Tri-Wizard Cup Tournament...

The letter went on in detail citing the relevant laws and clauses. The case presented in the letter was that while there was a legal, binding magical contract, and that Harry's participation could not be nullified or voided without severe magical penalty. However, as a minor competing in the tournament, that opened up a number of avenues for Gringotts to cause all manner of problems for the Ministry of Magic. Grabbing a quill and a length of parchment, Accounts Manager Griphook, suddenly found that things were looking up, especially if the Harry Potter wanted him to handle the matter.

Goblins are if nothing else, quick to spot a business opportunity and the fact that Griphook had received the request from Mr. Potter personally, his superiors had no qualms about assigning him both the account and an immediate promotion to reflect its importance. Failure to keep such a customer happy would of course, immediate death upon crossed spears, as was tradition and custom. Senior Accounts Manager Griphook suddenly had a great deal to do, including retrieving a copy of the tournaments rules and regulations from archives, before unleashing the bank's team of legal experts on the matter. On top of that, he had to draft a reply to Mr. Potter.

Monday morning was bright and sunny and Harry was soaked. He had been up since a little after five in the morning and had completed his run, but kept jogging on the spot; it was a little after six in the morning and Hermione was not that far behind him. She caught up several minutes later, breathing hard but not quite out of breath. It was a good sign he supposed, she would catch up with him soon enough.

The couple had kept their new relationship as quiet as possible, not wanting to draw any additional attention to Harry but also because he was afraid that it would make her a target for who knows what. Sunday had been easy enough barring a few verbal arrows and one actual projectile, sans arrowhead from a particular irate Hufflepuff 5th year that was now facing detention.

That was about to change.

Chapter 2:

Strike, Magic, and Counterstrike

Coming down from Gryffindor tower, Ronald Weasley, sixth of seven children was in a very dark mood. He had made a point of blatantly ignoring one Harry James Potter. However, it is very hard to be pointedly ignoring someone if you cannot find them. Compounding his mood was that his supposed best friend, Hermione had been missing for almost a full day. He knew she was level headed, sensible, and brilliant to fall for Harry's act. He just knew it. He had piled his plate high with food, when the normally noisy and busy Great hall suddenly fell completely silent, as if a horde of Dementors had just glided in.

His fork clattered to his plate, his mouth half open to expose the fried egg and sausage he had been chewing on as they walked in holding hands. He watched in stunned disbelief: They were holding hands! Each other's hands! Then Harry did the unthinkable and kissed Hermione on the cheek. His Hermione! They sat down amongst the first years as far away from him as physically possible. Hermione spared him the barest of a glance. Harry did not even look in his direction. Dark and moody, everything reached a boiling point as something within Ronald Billius Weasley snapped as he surged to his feet, stopping all activity around him.

"You selfish! Self-centered! Arrogant! Prat!" screamed Ron as he stalked the length of the Gryffindor table towards his former friends, "You lie and cheat your way in to the tournament!" he was beyond anger, beyond fury, "Then you steal my Hermione! She was mine! She was meant to be mine!"

Hermione stepped forward, hands raised to placate the raging Gryffindor only to find herself staring at the tip of Ron's wand, "Ron, please..." Her eyes widened as from a distance of two feet, she saw the magic sweep from the teenager's fingertips, down the length of the wand.

Quidditch reflexes had Harry first push Hermione to the floor, his wand rising even as he did so, "Declino alica!" The absorbing spell lived up to its name, absorbing the hex and then redirecting it towards the ceiling. His eyes narrowed, focused on the flaming hair of his attacker and retaliated with a widow maker punch that caught

the redhead square on the nose. Trading blows with Dudley and his gang in the alleys around Little Whinging had forced Harry to learn to brawl, and he did, like a street fighter. The follow up blows were fast and driven by anger as Ron rocked back, bent double from a one-two combination to the stomach.

Rendered incoherent with pain, Ron unleashed a string of hexes and curses that missed their intended target but struck the gathered crowd. A retaliatory curse was on the tip of Harry's tongue when Hermione reached up and grabbed his free hand, upsetting his balance slightly as he looked down. She blinked. She had never seen the gleam in his eye before, it was a mix of power and something else that almost made her shudder, "Don't. Harry, it's not worth it."

A shield snapped in to existence, covering them both as one of Ron's curses very nearly struck its mark, but was deflected upwards where it vanished against the roof of the great hall. Harry smiled, "Nice timing there... love," he whispered and caught her expression, "Did he get you?" his voice took on a slightly dark edge until she shook her head. He relaxed and pulled her in to a hug

"Potter!" screamed black robed Professor Severus Snape, head of Slytherin house, arguably Harry's greatest enemy within the walls of Hogwarts. Already storming towards them were irate Professors Snape and McGonagall, with Headmaster Dumbledore trailing several steps behind. Poppy Pomfrey was helping Ron stem the flow of blood from his broken nose. "What, in Merlin's name, did you do, Potter?" the last word was filled with several decades worth of anger, hatred and disgust.

With Hermione holding his hand, Harry suddenly realized something important: Snape. Bully. Foul Temper. Hated James Potter. Hated Harry Potter by extension. Snape was to Hogwarts, as Dudley was to Little Whinging, "I'm sorry, sir. But I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Do not lie to me! You arrogant, attention seeking brat!" snarled Snape, 'Attacking another student in the Great Hall! In front of six professors and half the school no less! Does your arrogance know no bounds?"

"If you would care to review the facts as they stand, professor, Ron fired first, I defended myself, then he fires off a half dozen spells," he pointed to several of Ron's victims, "cursing innocent bystanders in front of five professors and half the school!"

If Snape's sneer could have grown any wider or more disdainful, it probably would have, "If you were even half the man I am, you would just admit that you provoked it!" Snape just stared straight into Harry's eyes and there was a sudden tickle at the back of his brain. He jerked his head to the side, breaking eye contact with Snape. If looks could kill, Harry would have almost certainly been dead, or least petrified. But what was that? It felt as if someone or something was trying to attack his mind. He was not sure but made a note to himself: Avoid eye contact with Snape in future.

"Crisis barely averted," thought the headmaster. Ron was already on his way to the hospital wing for a broken nose. Professor McGonagall was already ushering the students back to their food. He caught Harry's gaze and realized that there was something different about the boy standing before him. Love, he realized. Harry was in love and made it obvious as he protectively pulled Hermione close to him, and whispered something in her ear. That changed the situation.

That afternoon, on the outskirts of Ottery St. Catchpole, near Devon, Molly Weasley stood contemplating the garden, and the need to denounce it once again. She was standing at the sink when an owl flew in to present her with an owl and a letter bearing the crest of the headmaster of Hogwarts. The contents left her more than a little worried, as it was a complete account of Ron's actions towards Harry and Hermione.

She had not even put down the headmaster's letter when a Hogwarts owl flapped through the window, this time bearing the neat, concise writing of Minerva McGonagall. Molly could recognize the writing in part due to the detention notices she received regarding her twin boys on an almost weekly basis. McGonagall's letter only repeated and confirmed everything that Dumbledore had already confirmed.

From shock, to disappointment and dismay, she made her way in to the living room to make a floo call. Otherwise, Arthur would have to wait until he got home before learning of all the news... including an

embarrassing first: The letter included a summons to appear at Hogwarts to discuss their son's behavior. Molly knew this was bad. Even the twins, with their never-ending stream of detention notices, had ever had their parents summoned to Hogwarts. The parent teacher conference scheduled for the following day was going to make the coming few weeks at home, very uncomfortable for Ron.

Back at Hogwarts that evening, Hermione Granger sat next to her boyfriend.... Boyfriend... she had to admit that she liked the way that sounded. However, her thoughts focused on something far more important: Everyone assumed she cast the second shield. However, her wand was in her bag at the time...she shifted slightly, "Harry?" He withdrew from the charms textbook he had been buried in. "I need to tell you about.... I didn't cast that second shield."

Harry looked confused, "What? Then who?" he shrugged, brushing it aside, "Guess somebody out there still likes me..." He made light of the matter because he was not sure what else he could do. If he did have someone watching out for him, hopefully that someone meant him no harm...

In another part of the castle, Headmaster Dumbledore stared out the window of his office, one hand absent-mindedly stroking Fawkes. Whoever had placed Harry's name in to the Goblet of Fire had outmaneuvered him but the situation he could still control the situation. He could still, indirectly control Harry's actions for the moment. Thank goodness, there was not a complete set of the tournament rules in the Ministry of Magic - he had seen to that personally. More importantly, the lad had yet to figure out that he could petition the wizarding courts for emancipation the moment he turned fifteen...

The long term, the bigger picture, and the greater good occupied Albus Percival Wulfric Brain Dumbledore as he began to plan just how to regain control of Harry. So wrapped up in his plots and counter plots, he failed to notice the quiet trill of dissatisfaction from Fawkes, who subtly shifted on his perch, so that his back was facing the headmaster.

In Gryffindor Tower, the twin Weaselys were trying to get through to prevent the youngest of the Weasely's from punching out her brother, "Honestly Ron! You've got the emotional range of a teaspoon and enough common sense to fill a small teaspoon and

barely enough intelligence to fill a thimble!" Ron lived with five older brothers, and had become very good at tuning out whatever he did not want to hear. Everything said fell in to that particular category as he turned things over in his own mind.

"He has everything. Money, fame, and those two things bring him power, influence and he's too thick headed to what he can do with all of that," though Ron bitterly, "What I would do have just the money! And then he goes off and steals my girl from me?" Even Ron was not dense enough to contemplate calling Hermione Granger his girlfriend, especially since he had never done anything about his attraction.

"...mum about what you did! Throwing curses at your two best friends! Mum will be furious! And so am I! It's not like you're rich in the friends department!" Only one word had penetrated the boy's auditory shield: "Mum."

"Wait, what... why on earth would you tell mum anything?"

Ginny shook her head in exasperation, "You've not heard a word any of us having been saying. McGonagall has already sent an owl to mum! If you're lucky, there will just be howler!" that crashed through the shields in a heartbeat, "Or she might just deliver you a howler in person!"

"But, but why would McGonagall contact mum? I was the one who got his nose broken!" it was clear that he was still in rage and a funk about it, as he couldn't even bring himself to say their names.

The twins clamped on to Ginny, as her simmering temper finally reached its boiling point, "You fired curses at two unarmed students in the Great Hall, in front of at least a hundred witnesses! Six of whom were teachers!" George was convinced that sparks would start flying from Ginny's ears any second.

"Well, brother of mine, it would seem that there was nothing left in the brains department of five sons for the sixth son." Commented Fred, always making jokes regardless of whether the mood and the moment suited it.

"While I couldn't agree more," replied George, "I suggest we remove the firecracker before it goes up like a deflagration deluxe!" Fred

gave his twin brother a sharp look, and George had the good grace to look slightly embarrassed. Dragging an irate Ginny, the twins left Ron to ferment.

That evening, the Trophy Room was once again to witness Ron scrubbing awards, trophies, and medals without the aid of magic. He had done this once before, during his second year and had hated it as much then as he did now. Only this time, he had done nothing to deserve it! He continued to boil as he mentally ranted, "Why does Potter get all the glory and fame. It's not as if he even deserves it. I am from a respectable Pureblood family and I'm stuck playing second fiddle to the bloody Boy-Who-Lived. On top of that, Hermione insists that Potter didn't want to enter. Entered against his will - my eye! If she's so smart, why doesn't she see the truth when it's so obvious that Harry Potter is an attention seeking prat?"

As he was mentally ranting about the injustice of things, Ron did not hear Draco Malfoy walk in, until the Slytherin spoke, "So Weasley, since you've finally seen the truth about Potter, perhaps you are open to discussing other opinions about our world."

Ron looked at Draco and thought about it for a moment, "Depends what you want to talk about, Malfoy." He looked around the room and noticed that the Caretaker Argus Filch was nowhere. Where was back up when you needed it?

Smiling, "That Squib has been, distracted for the next two hours or so and will only come back after your detention is long finished." Draco offered his hand, "Draco Ares Malfoy. I once said to Harry that some wizarding families are much better than others are. I think I should have been talking to you, instead of him." Ron hesitated, "Don't worry about the medals," he snapped his fingers and Crabbe and Goyle sauntered in, half escorting, half herding the first and second year students from Slytherin, "They'll take care of your detention well enough." The cracking knuckles of the brutes were incentive enough for the first and second years to get to work.

Intrigued, Ron followed Draco out of the trophy room, but found himself hesitant to take that first step in to the Slytherin Common Room. It was the snake pit. His hesitation brought the hint of smile to Draco's face, "You don't have to worry Wea... Ronald," he said, "Though I laud your caution considering out past." Draco reached in to his pocket and pulled his wand and to Ron's surprise handed in to

Ron, "Consider this, a token of good faith. I give you my word that you will come to no harm unless you strike first."

Still cagey, the chess master in Ron analyzed the situation and came to the only logical conclusion: He should walk back to the Trophy Room and serve out his detention. "Walk away, but I can help you," said Draco quietly, "You and Potter, three years of friendship and he chucks it all away. Revenge. Money. Power. Perhaps even fame. I can do a lot..."

Ron took the proffered wand, and drew his own. Draco nodded once, approvingly and led the way in to the heart of Slytherin House. The layout had not changed since his last time in here. During his second year, he had gained entry with Harry, both of them disguised with Polyjuice. It was still a low ceiled dungeon like room with low backed black and dark green leather sofas and dark wood cupboards in the corners and running along the far wall. A series of lamps that gave off light with a greenish tinge and it reconfirmed Ron's initial assessment for two years ago: Grandly spooky sort of place.

Once there, the two of them sat down and Ron listened, while Draco simply talked. It began as more of a lecture but quickly became more of lively debate. Ron slowly began to realize that what Draco talked about when he said that some wizarding families were better than others were and not entirely because of money, infamy, fame, or influence. His own family had fallen so far, so fast; he found that he could believe that the Pureblood way of thinking was the correct way.

An hour later, Ron thanked Draco for enlightening him, and headed back to Gryffindor Tower with a lot to think about. Draco was very pleased with how his day had turned out. With a little more persuasion, he would probably have a new recruit for the pureblood cause.

Chapter 3:

Conquer the Past

Tuesday morning was bright and sunny and Harry was sweat soaked. Awake since just before six in the morning, Harry had completed his morning run, exhausted but he kept jogging on the spot; it was a little after 06:30 in the morning and Hermione was not that far behind him. She caught up several minutes later, breathing hard but not out of breath. They had jogged a little over two kilometers and agreed to take it slow and build things up rather than avoid injury before returning for a shower and then descending for breakfast.

When the post owls swooped in from the ceiling as they did every morning, Harry grinned at Hedwig. She landed and walked with the simply majesty of the post owl and presented her leg to Harry. He took the length of parchment and let her have a sip of his pumpkin juice and a rasher of bacon from his plate as Hermione waited, somewhat impatiently for him to unfurl the letter. He scanned through it quickly, his eye widening slightly before he handed it to her. Even in the bustling hall, seated in the middle of the table, the pair had plenty of room, with seats on both sides and opposite them left empty. It was a clear message from Gryffindor House: They would stand with him, because he was one of them, because they chose to do the right thing, not because they wanted to.

Greetings and Salutation Mr. Potter,

It is to our displeasure that we learn that you are once again in harms' way. Upon receiving the copy of both the tournament contract and retrieving the archive copy of the tournaments rules, regulations and code of conduct for the Tri-wizard Tournament, our legal experts have come to the unanimous conclusion that the contract is legally binding and unbreakable unless you are willing to suffer the consequences.

The binding nature of the contract stems from the assumption that any student who places their name in to the Goblet of Fire understands that they are entering a binding contract with the Goblet. The Goblet is unable to comprehend precisely your situation and chose you to represent your school, sealing the magical contract.

There are numerous legal loopholes that are available for you exploitation, in part due to the fact that the Ministry of Magic's copy of the rules is incomplete. With the Champions drawn and the Tournament underway, the rules are in effect irrevocable until after the current incarnation of the Triwizard Cup.

In essence, you competing in a ministry-sponsored event reserved for witches and wizards of age against your free will. Thus, the Ministry of Magic must recognize you as an adult or more likely, an emancipated minor for the duration of the tournament for you to be eligible to compete in the 1994 Triwizard Tournament.

Full emancipation is not possible due to your age, and requires the approval of several different individuals including the current headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Irrespective of this, as an emancipated minor, you would gain immediate access and control of the Potter Family Vault. I would like to invite you to a meeting at your earliest convenience to discuss the possibilities and ramifications of your decisions. Beyond the wards of Hogwarts, this letter will function as a portkey activated by the phrase "Goblin Sanctuary."

Gringotts stands ready to render whatever assistance you require.

Sincerely yours,

Griphook

Senior Accounts Manager

Hermione met Harry's gaze and the couple shared a brief smile. Although they had been a couple for only three days, their connection negated the need for words. That evening well before curfew, they met at the statue of Gunhilda and with a tap of a wand and the whispered password, "Dissendium" the teens were walking down the narrow passageway that led to the cellar of Hogsmeade's Honeydukes sweet shop where they activated the portkey.

All branches of Gringotts share a number of similarities, such as in the basic construction of their wards in two principle layers. The first was to keep whatever was inside the bank on the inside. The second layer was to keep the outside world, on the outside. Even the mildest of the wards would be powerful enough to keep even

any witch or wizard occupied until the goblins could respond with lethal force. It was why there had ever been few attempts to break in to any branch of Gringotts: Every branch of Gringotts rests on Goblin land, where Goblin law rules. The specially designed portkey passed through both layers of wards and other security measures to Griphook's office without incident. Even though recognized, the guards tensed slightly until Griphook commanded them to stand at ease, much like the teens standing before him.

Hermione, at any rate, was standing. Harry was sprawled across the plush red carpeting. He had never mastered exactly how to keep standing during a portkey trip. The doors swung inwards of their own accord and the Goblin gave a short, half bow to the wizards standing before him. "Greetings and welcome to the Bank of Gringotts, Mr. Potter."

The vast Hogwarts library had contained only a few books on Goblin culture and etiquette. Having read and then studied the teens both bowed from the waist, slightly lower than Griphook had and rose with their right arm crossed over their chest, hand closed in a fist over their shoulder as if clenching the hilt of a Goblin battle-axe. "Greetings Griphook, may your gold forever multiply," replied Harry, taking care to meet the gaze of the slightly astonished Goblin.

"And may your enemies suffer horrible death upon your blade." continued Hermione smoothly. Griphook broke in to a smile that was all teeth and both teenagers relaxed slightly at the expression of pleasure.

"Ms. Granger, welcome to Gringotts." He paused for a moment, "I have taken the liberty of arranging some refreshments while we conduct our business. Would that be satisfactory?" Thirty minutes later, both teenagers were somewhat shaken, drinking cups of tea as they struggled to come to terms with several important things: The first was that Harry was just beyond incredibly wealthy. Suffice to say his combined assets placed him amongst the wealthiest wizards of the world. Griphook explained that it was all his, and would become his when he reached the age of majority – seventeen in the wizarding world. However, due to his involuntary participation in the Triwizard Tournament, he was, effectively, immediately an emancipated minor. He had access to and control of his trust and family vault. Control of his properties, and other investments would remain in the control of his magical guardian, Albus Dumbledore.

Albus Dumbledore, greatest British wizard in the last century would have a great deal of explaining and accounting to do. For the first time, Harry discovered that his parents had left behind a last will and testament with instructions should their worst fears come to pass. It had been, in a word: Ignored. Remus Lupin was denied custody due to his Lycanthropy. Frank and Alice Longbottom were deemed unfit due to a long-term medical condition that required long-term care. Augusta Longbottom, Matriarch of the Longbottom Clan was never informed.

When Harry revealed that he had never seen the Potter family vault, Griphook stared at him for a long moment. He snapped a series of orders and leading them through the warrens to the carts, "Mr. Potter, a witch or wizard is supposed to be taken to see, and have their blood added to the protections and securities upon their family vault at the age of eleven. Why this has not been done, I do not know." That would be something else for Albus Dumbledore to answer. The wind whistled around them as they hurtled deeper in to the earth until they stopped at a vault numbering in the double digits instead of the usual three or four digits.

The goblin took his time to explain the nature of the blood wards that protected the vaults. A quick cut across the fingertip, three drops of blood later and the runes upon the door glowed gold and red before fading away. The wards kept everyone but those of the bloodline. Even the Goblins access was limited to depositing gold and other items. Despite numerous attempts, bribes, negotiations and blackmail attempts, Dumbledore had never accessed the vault or even found its number. There was money aplenty in the trust vault but twenty trust vaults could fit inside the one he was currently standing in. Harry made a note to come down here some time, to truly explore the vault properly including the furniture, suits of armor and heaven alone knew what else.

When they returned to the Griphook's office, they simply talked, or more accurately, Harry did, venting several years of frustrations and anger and disbelief, and Griphook grew visibly more agitated the more he learned of Harry's misadventures. The mention of the slain Basilisk had the goblin's undivided attention, "Fifty feet? It would be one of the largest specimens on record and worth a several small fortunes!"

Harry just shrugged, "It might be bigger than fifty feet... I didn't have a tape measure on me at the time, just a sword," he said with a slight smile. Griphook stared for a moment and Hermione squeezed his knee somewhat nervously as Harry sallied forth, "Though perhaps, a battle axe would have been preferable." The teenage wizards realized what they were hearing was the sound of Goblin laughter.

Griphook's demeanor changed, going from open and friendly – for a Goblin – to one of professional reserve, "I have a few business propositions." The couple shared a glance and nodded, "Very well, first of all, the Basilisk. As you slew the creature, it is yours to do with, by right of conquest. I would like your permission to gather the apothecary to harvest the creature. A second matter is the tournament. What exactly are your objectives?"

"Survive it, and not look like a complete idiot while doing it." Harry answered easily.

"With Hogwarts already having drawn a champion, in essence you do not represent a school. I would like to propose that you represent the Goblin's in this tournament. We have our own magic school if you will," The name in gobbledegook was long and far too complicated for either of the teenagers to pronounce, "but we refer to it is Urkz-Khou. I would suggest that you allow Gringotts to act as your representative - better than having Wizards butcher the name of one of our finest institutions of learning. We would of course, pay handsomely for both opportunities, especially the honor" there was no sarcasm in the Goblin's manner, "of having a wizard of your fame and stature represent Urkz-Khou, and by extension the interest of the Goblin Nation." Harry seemed to shut down for a few moments, as he gathered a breath and exhaled it slowly. Griphook had seen the sudden flash of panic in the young wizard's eyes, and he was suddenly having visions of the crossed spears in his immediate future, "It would appear, Mr. Potter, that I have touched upon a subject of a sensitive nature..."

Harry shook his head, "Yes. Yes, you have," confirmed Harry, "But it is not your fault. You, just don't know..."

Hermione stepped in, "What Harry means to say Griphook, is that the fame and recognition and its accompanying spotlight, it is not something that he neither craves nor even wants. In the past few

days, he has learned that he is in a competition where people have died, found himself a girlfriend," she squeezed his hand gently, "Become the future and possibly last patriarch of his line, discovered he is rich enough to never ever need work again and on top of it all, he is only fourteen years old. The money, the power, the influence, the fame... it's all..."

"Too much," finished Harry, "for any teen, for almost any wizard. I had hoped to have a normal quiet year at Hogwarts, where my biggest problem would have been class assignments, quizzes and examinations and perhaps finding myself a girlfriend," Hermione grinned at the last part, "Fate it seems, just does not want to leave me alone." He said the last without hint of malice or rancor, and it left the goblin stunned. He had yet to meet more than a handful of wizards who did not covet money and power, "If you can get around Albus Dumbledore, you can harvest the Basilisk, and Griphook, I would welcome the backing of the ... the backing of Gringotts for the Triwizard Tournament, especially if you can help me have some fun with the ministry. But I have one condition."

"Yes, Mr. Potter?"

"Call me Harry."

Griphook had not been sure what to expect. Griphook was his name in the Wizard tongue. Amongst Goblins, to refer to anyone by just their given name, without title or honorifics was an uncommon honor. He suddenly realized just how much more mature the... young wizard before him was. If a Goblin smile made wizards nervous, then a goblin grin would be a fearsome or perhaps terrifying sight, "Harry, it is." The goblin sipped his tea, "Might I suggest that one of your immediate goals should be to subdue the media?"

They returned to the castle the same way they left, and retrieved the Marauder's map after checking several different clocks and watches. Had they only been in Gringotts for an hour? - It did not take long for them to locate their target in the library.

The library was vast, taking up a great deal of the fourth floor with thousands of books on at least several thousand shelves. It was such a depository of knowledge that there were entire sections devoted to a single subject. Study tables nestled in corners and in between the spread out stacks throughout the red-carpeted rooms

and criss-crossed between the full bookshelves. The high vaulted roof of the library gave credence to the theory that it had once been a cathedral as they meandered through the stacks on the balcony that overlooked the main floor, "Luna Lovegood?" Harry whispered.

The blond heard her name called and sighed, pitying whomever it was who wanted to make fun of her, or steal her belongings now. She had been hoping to stay out of the way, beneath notice for as long as possible, what with the drawing of the names for the tournament. The narrow mindedness of some people... her train of thought was abruptly derailed when she realized just who had whispered her name. Introductions were not necessary. Despite her suddenly dry mouth and frozen vocal cords, Luan knew who was standing before her, with his hand outstretched, "I... we understand that your father owns The Quibbler. I have a business proposition: Exclusive rights and access to Harry James Potter." He explained with a smile.

The ever-watchful Madame Pince considered the silence and tranquility of the library sacrosanct. Luna responded with the ferocity and volume of an artillery battery, "My housemates making fun of me and stealing my belongings is one thing!" Her first barrage shattered the peace and tranquility of the library and Hermione could already hear the march of the angry librarian, not that Luna cared, "I half expected something different from the great Harry Potter! When I actually want to be scorned and the butt of another "loony" joke, I will spend my time in the Ravenclaw Common Room!" Madam Pince was standing stock still, less than three feet from them, when she suddenly turned and walked back the way she had come. Luna blinked, curious about the magical wave she had just felt pass over all three of them.

"Privacy, silencing, and notice me not charms," whispered Hermione. None of them had cast anything. That much was clear: None of the trio were holding a wand, "If it wasn't so helpful, I think I'd be rather scared of what, or who keeps helping like this."

Suddenly a pair of emerald green eyes had locked with her silver grey ones, "Luna," he said simply, "I've been feared, and reviled as the next Dark Lord. I am hated on principal by Malfoy and despised by Snape because I was born. I am famous, for something I don't remember, and didn't even do," he whispered the last; "I spent my

summer thinking about it all and realized that it was my mother's sacrifice that saved me. I don't know how or why but whatever she did caused the killing curse to rebound. The hero is Lily Potter. It was never me," he said honestly, "I may tease my friends a little, and sometimes, sometimes I do say things I wish I hadn't said," He was thinking of Ron at that moment, "But I don't do it on purpose. Please. Just give us a minute."

Hermione handed the roll of parchment to Luna. "It's a serious offer Luna. We know The Quibbler is small, family owned and run..."

Luna shook her head, parchment in hand, "Like you said: Small paper, family owned and family run. We can't afford to pay what you want for that kind of an exclusivity deal."

"Not true," grinned Harry, "I forget the exact law," he gently nudged his girlfriend in the ribs, almost as if daring her to interrupt.

She grinned back, "Laws of Magical Trade and Business, Section 31, subsection 10, paragraph O," much to Luna's amusement.

"Yes, what my darling Hermione just said," he confirmed, oblivious to what he'd just said "The minimum rate for such an exclusivity deal is subject to negotiation between the parties concerned. I'm willing to grant exclusivity to The Quibbler until the start of the summer holidays, for the price of one Galleon." It seemed that the offer was not only genuine, but had already received the stamp of approval from the legal department of Gringotts and the Quibbler's own law firm.

Luna had been helping run the paper during the holidays, even writing and contributing her own pieces. Her father had allowed her to join him on the board of directors, making the total number of directors two. This was the opportunity of a lifetime, "This deal is with you, your father and the Quibbler," said Harry.

She pulled a quill from her bag, "I am on the board of directors and my father said I would have the authority to consider any deal, and sign on any valued at less than fifty Galleons. So on behalf of the Quibbler," she paused and scrawled her signature across the veritable dotted line, "It would be an honor to accept this business arrangement and enter in to business with you." With Harry signing the contract and Hermione signing as the legal witness, the

parchment glowed a deep ocean blue and copied itself. The original was for Gringotts who would handling the payment, and one copy for each party. With the deal done, she broke in to a smile, 'My father wouldn't sell the Quibbler for all the gold in your vault.'

"What about all the gold in Gringotts?" he countered.

She hummed for only a moment, "A tempting offer, but still not enough." A chuckle of laughter broke out as Harry took Hermione's hand in his own and extended his free hand to Luna. She took it surprise written across her face, "Why now?" she whispered, almost afraid to believe what was happening was true.

"I've let others dictate my life, and its time I start to make decisions of my own," said Harry amicably, "making new friends seems like a good place to start." The trio left the library, Luna with her book bag slung over one shoulder.

Friends, Luna thought, "Yes. That would be a good thing."

The following morning at breakfast, the owls delivered the post as usual. A minute after that, things kicked off. Wizards use owls to deliver their post, and Goblins use them for routine communiqués. However, the purebloods and most of the half bloods could only stare in disbelief. The fire sprites appeared in a blaze of flame that had crackles of white lightning running through it. They landed lighted on their clawed feet and delivered the messages, without care for the upset drink, scattered food and in one case a mop and pail before vanishing, leaving four students and Filch holding envelopes.

The cantankerous caretaker was first to tear open his envelope and his expression, Harry was sure, would have been worth a picture. He stomped, more than walked towards Harry and thrust out the letter, "Potter, what, what is this?" his voice was a mix of confusion and fear.

Harry grinned, "Compensation."

Ginny had opened her own letter and gasped at the sum, "Seventy five, thousand Galleons!" she stuttered, rubbing her eyes as she stared at the parchment. "But," Colin Creevey and Justin Finch-Fletchley had opened their own envelopes and confirmed that they

all contained the same thing: Notification from Gringotts that they were account holders with a balance of 75,000 Galleons or had the aforementioned amount debited to their existing accounts, "Why? Why now Harry?" asked Ginny.

"It is, what it is," Harry replied evenly, as he raised his voice, "Compensation for those who were attacked by the Basilisk during my second year!" another fire sprite suddenly materialized and delivered a fifth envelope, to Hermione. The exchange rate to the British pound being what it is, the bank draft was worth almost a quarter of a million pounds! He put his hand on her shoulder, "It's only right," he whispered, "Besides, Hagrid should have gotten his by now."

He turned towards the staff table to address his head of house. After everything, he had learned about Albus Dumbledore's dealing and meddling, ignoring him was the least Harry could do, "Professor McGonagall, the remains of the Basilisk which I killed with the Sword of Godric Gryffindor is still in the Chamber of Secrets. By the laws that govern the wizarding world, it is mine by right of conquest." Snape's mouth hung open for a moment and then snapped shut with a sharp click, "The corpse has already been sold."

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore realized that things were not going according to plan. The boy should be a basket case of nerves and worry. Instead, he was facing down his attack dog. He had planned to step in and play mediator when things began to get out of hand. However, Harry had moved quicker than anticipated. The first step to countering any opponent was knowledge: "Perhaps, Harry," said Dumbledore, with the ever-present twinkle in his eye, "you could explain who you sold the basilisk to?"

The Goblin love of war is no secret; their love of making money as bankers and financiers is a close second to their first love. However, if there is one thing that the art of war and making money have in common, it is the opportunity for spectacular spectacles, as was unfolding in the Great Hall of Hogwarts on that crisp November morning.

When the doors to the Great Hall slammed open, the sound of metal clashing on metal filled the hall, as Griphook marched in flanked by warriors who protected a further dozen Goblins, levitating large cases between them. Albus Dumbledore recognized the silver axe

clutched in a red claw insignia of the elite Agaam Gharaar Muukuur Hor or "Axe Master Honor Guard." They were not protecting the lead Goblin; they were protecting the akhuukhaalagec – apothecary who were here for the Basilisk.

"Mr. Potter," the Goblin bowed and then turned to face his companion, "Ms. Granger." Dumbledore was slightly miffed when ignored. Hermione and Harry smiled, and bowed, as they had done before, much to the surprise of everyone, "My apologies for the delay, but it took us somewhat longer than anticipated to enter the grounds of the castle due to some rather unusual enchantments."

"No apologies necessary," said Harry, "I trust that you and you kin are ready to proceed?" the goblin nodded briskly and began barking orders. Harry turned to address Luna, "Triwizard Champions are allowed a retinue of advisers, followers and so forth. As my official press representative, I formally invite you to join my retinue."

Having never been made particularly welcome in the Ravenclaw dorm, she lost her usual dreamy look in a flash and made the decision in a split second, "I accept." she replied without even looking to any of her housemates.

Things were getting a little too far out of control for Dumbledore's taste as he moved to nip things in the bud, "I believe that would not be possible," he said passing judgment, "the rules of the tournament..."

More than one Goblin had dreamed for this moment: To stick it to this particular wizard. Griphook stepped forward, a roll of parchment in hand, "That decision is not yours to make headmaster. The rules and regulations of the Triwizard Tournament are very clear, on a number of points. Firstly, under Section 3, sub-section 5C, the tournament may host as many champions as there are schools, but all schools are limited to have only one champion participating in the tournament. Mr. Potter' participation was coerced as he was entered under the name of a fictitious fourth school. Section 1 clearly states that each school participating in the tournament may have only one Champion. In essence, the Champion of Hogwarts was and is Cedric Diggory." There was a look of surprise on the face of every Hufflepuff present, "Furthermore, Mr. Potter has graciously accepted the offer to represent Urzk-Khou Garabash Huzkagai, or simply Gringotts."

Dumbledore kept his temper firmly in check as he saw several decades of careful planning, manipulation and string pulling washed in to the Black Lake. The misconception that the goblins hated wizards in general was one the purebloods were happy to cultivate, and one that Dumbledore was happy to help perpetuate on the sly. Keeping the Goblins as second-class citizens and at odds with everyone else had prevented them from being a unifying force for other races such as the House Elf, Centaur, and possibly even the Vampire and the Werewolf. Harry had not only undermined but also undone everything he had done to keep these races at odds to avoid them joining Voldemort!

Griphook amusement had become enjoyment, as was clear to those few in the know about the goblin smiles. "As a representative of another school, Mr. Potter is entitled to the same conditions and the privileges as the other three champions, per Section two, subsection one through seven: He is entitled to separate living quarters and training facilities, away from his fellow champions on the grounds or within the hosting school which is in this instance, Hogwarts. Furthermore, Section 2, subsection eight states clearly that family, friends and loved ones can be accommodated with the Champion if they so choose. Subsection 9 extends the same privileges to those who are members of the Champions Retinue, which at present formally includes Ms. Luna Lovegood, Hogwarts, Ravenclaw House, and Hermione Granger, Hogwarts, Gryffindor House. Subsection nine, sub clauses one and two clearly state that champions may alter the composition of their retinues to suit their needs and purposes at any time of their choosing."

Griphook's smile became an all teeth grin, "Finally, Section 27, subsections one through fifteen grant any underage Champion participating in the Triwizard tournament partial emancipation, and a release from the Ministry of Magic's Decree for Underaged Wizardry for the duration of the tournament, and immediate access to their finances and their family vault!" Dumbledore was beyond worried but he managed to keep his poker face intact. Harry had access to his finances, and could possibly take the next step towards full emancipation. The boy now had partial emancipation to participate in the tournament. "Section fourteen, subsection three, clauses two through seven state that an underage wizard chosen to represent his school in the Triwizard Tournament is granted immediate and irrevocable partial emancipation and a waiver to the ministry of

magic's restrictions on underage magic." On the inside, the headmaster panicked for a moment at the thought of the Potter family vault! A casual glance in to the boy's head with legilimacy revealed that he knew about that too.

Harry was a Champion, backed by the Goblins, and Gringotts. The key was emancipation, Dumbledore decided. So long as the boy did not try for that, he could get him back to the Durseleys for the summer. He would just have to bide his time for the moment. The master manipulator had to admit that he had been out maneuvered and significantly undercut. Magical law was clear that all tournament rules applied unless revoked before the lighting of the Goblet of Fire. No one had been able to find a full copy of the rules because he had altered the rules and destroyed the original. Nevertheless, the goblins had one! The Goblins! Moreover, they were using them against him and there was nothing he could do about it!

Hermione stood speechless at the Harry standing beside her. He was far more confident, more determined and there was an air of direct forthrightness about him. It seemed to be clear that he was becoming something of an unstoppable force that was now studying its fellow Gryffindor, "Colin, I assume that you have your camera on you?" The boy nodded, a little uncertain as to where this particular line of conversation was going as Harry broke in to a smile, "You want to take a picture of the monster that put you in the hospital wing? "

As it so happened, Colin was capable of flying without a broom as Harry turned, and extended a hand to another Gryffindor. His eyes sought hers, and the poor girl was whiter than a sheet in the hospital wing, "Ginny?"

She nodded her jaw had a determined set to it, "...put the past behind me...." the raven-haired boy swept his gaze over the few others who were still holding their letters, and without another word, they joined him. They trooped out of the hall towards Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, only to find that most of the school was following behind them.

"Uh, Harry... we may have a, small problem developing behind us," whispered Hermione.

Luna had spent her years at Hogwarts always listening, watching and observing because people never wanted her participation. However, having spent so long observing without judging, she instinctively slowed her pace, closing with Ginny and gently took the girl's hand, and gave it a comforting squeeze. On Ginny's right, Hermione was doing exactly the same thing. For the first time in her years at Hogwarts, she was on the receiving end of two smiles, and Luna suddenly understood what friendship and acceptance for who you are feels like.

Ginny was visibly shaking, "Ginny. You know that I ... we won't let anything happen to you right?" The younger girl could only swallow on a dry throat and nod.

Everyone watched in amazement as a hiss of parseltongue moved the sink aside, and stairs seemed to grow out of the stone sides of the tunnel. The Goblins and a select few students began their descent, with Harry hanging slightly back. Just after Professor McGonagall began to descend, a barrier snapped in to place. Dumbledore literally walked in to it. He blinked and drew his wand. It was an impressive bit of magic, he mused, but Harry could not cast a ward he.... the sheer reserve of power behind the ward meant he would be unable to overpower it, and subverting it would take too much time.

More significantly: This was not something a 14-year-old boy could have cast.

Chapter 4

Depths of the Dingiest Dungeon

Seated in a plushy armchair of his own conjuration, the apparently serene headmaster patiently waiting the return of the trio of students he had correctly concluded to be at the heart of the day's events. Serene as he appeared to be, Dumbledore was actually in turmoil. He knew that Harry had not, could not have cast the charm or ward to create such a barrier.

The enraged potions master had not wasted an instant once the barrier had blocked his descent, "Potter! Remove your barrier or I will have you in detention, every night for the rest of this school year!" he was furious that thousands of galleons in the rarest of potions ingredients slipped between his fingers.

"Severus, we wait," said the headmaster, having cast a silencing and privacy charm around them. Barred in his own castle, the headmaster appeared as if he was still in control of the situation as they waited for those allowed to pass to return. In the mean time however, the headmaster and his potions professor would have to somehow tune out Myrtle unending sobbing

Fleur Delacour had barely gone down a dozen steps before deciding that there was nothing here but rocks, slime and the carcass of a beast. She shrugged and retreated, unnoticed by Veela standards. Veela, by their very nature attract the attention of all who could be interested, not limited to only members of the opposite gender. Having lived with her gift, or curse for her entire life had made her accustom to the jealous stares of women, and the drooling men and the occasional woman - in this case twins. It had equipped the Veela with an almost diamond hard armor and the cold aloofness of an apocalypse survivor that won her few friends.

Those gathered below were standing by a cave in, the very same one where Lockhart had tried to obliviate both Harry and Ron. He waited patiently for the goblins to clear the way, even as he ruthlessly suppressed a twinge of compassion for Ron. Ron had brought all of his troubles down on himself. He sighed, and realized everyone was watching him, waiting for him to say something. He shrugged and filled them in on what had transpired with the coward

Lockhart, who had planned to obliviate them and play the tragic hero in what would have been another best seller.

Professor Flitwick however was more interested in what had transpired at the mouth of the chamber, "Mr. Potter, what was that ward upstairs? And why did it deny access to the headmaster?" It was no secret that Severus Snape was as unpopular amongst the teaching faculty as he was amongst the students. However, barring the headmaster was unusual, to say the least, never mind that out of the many students gathered, few had been granted passage.

"I honestly don't know sir," replied Harry with a shrug, "I can't cast a ward or spell that powerful." The three professors were not convinced that he did not know anything about the barrier, "But it's not the first time, someone has discreetly come to my aid." That remark left the gathered heads of house wondering what exactly they had missed as they stood before the door to the chamber itself, "I don't know how bad it's going to smell after two years." Hermione shrugged and cast a bubblehead charm on both of them.

Many of the students and professors chose to follow suit, "Ten points to Gryffindor!" squeaked the diminutive charm's professor. There was a chuckle from everyone as the door opened and their fears of the smell were proved unfounded, much to the amusement of the Goblins. Magical creatures do not begin to decompose until their innate magic has dissipated which given the size of the basilisk would not have been for at least another two to three hundred years. The torches along the walls burst in to life and the slain basilisk in all its glory stopped even the Goblins in their tracks.

Ginny was only on her feet by virtue of having Luna and Hermione holding her as they gently lowered the shaking girl to the floor, where she sobbed. Unsure what exactly he should or could do, he was saved from trying to comfort her by her brothers, who grabbed and dragged him aside, "I can't believe..." said Fred

"... that you fought that thing..." continued George

"...and killed it...." Replied Fred

"... to save our Ginny," concluded George. As always it was a little disconcerting talking to the twins without winding up with a severe

case of whiplash as the brothers shared a glance, and agreed on something, "You ever need anything, brother," started George.

"Anything at all," confirmed Fred.

"We're there," stated George, "brother!" They swept the confused teenager in a hug that would rival one of their mother's hugs before wiping their eyes and going to comfort their now, slightly less distraught sister.

"It's bloody gigantic! How the hell did you kill that with a sword?" asked Cedric. Justin and Colin could only stare at the dead monster as it sank in just how close they had come to being true friends instead of mere acquaintances with death. Neither muggle born would consider taking on such a creature with anything less than an army. Cedric shook his head. A French Veela would be eating her 'little boy' comment before too long.

Victor Krum was his usual dour self, but had taken note of the kill and made a note to actually step up his training and to take practice a little more seriously. He stared at the child...boy... Champion, he decided. Others could say what they want, but Champion Potter of Gringotts had slain a Basilisk at the age of twelve...

There was the flash as Colin snapped back to the moment and began taking pictures and after brief discussion with Griphook who was once again all teeth, he approached the Gryffindor photographer, with Luna in tow, "I've got a business proposition for both of you." The proposition was too good to be true for the young Gryffindor, who would have probably signed his soul over to Harry if asked. However, the professors presented prevented such a thing from happening as they agreed that the proposition was most generous in both its nature and the terms.

Ginny finally had herself under control enough to approach him, carrying a fang that had tatters of burned and melted paper along its edge. "Can I keep this?" she asked quietly. The fang was almost the length of her forearm, "it's the same one that you pulled from your arm and stabbed the diary with."

He took the fang from her, as the memories came rushing back of him dying as the acidic venom blazed an agonizing trail through his blood, struggling to apologize for being too slow, too late to save her.

That was of course, before Fawkes had shed tears in to the wound to save him. Hermione swept him up in a hug, "Typical Harry Potter," there was a lilt of laughter to her words, "He puts everyone before himself, even when he's about to die."

An embarrassed Harry replied, "If it makes you feel better Ginny then by all means take it, but make sure that it is safe – completely safe." She kissed him on the cheek and set off to find Griphook. She would have to do a lot to balance the life debt that she owed him, and did not exactly know where to start. Nevertheless, she would figure something out.

The flash from Colin's camera outlined the harvest of the Basilisk as they drained the creature's blood, and then began to harvest of its internal organs, fangs and venom glands. Finally, the apothecaries began to separate the scales from the skin. From start to finish, the blend of almost muggle techniques and magic had taken only a few hours.

Finally, getting the last few pictures of the Goblins separating the scales and skin, Colin joined the small exodus back in to the castle. Harry and his growing entourage stayed back when Professor McGonagall paused, "You do know, that the Headmaster will be waiting for you?" she did not have to add that Snape would be there too.

The headmaster seemed content to watch Professor Snape do his damndest to breach the ward, and had paid for his persistence with a multitude of light cuts, scratches, bruises and burns. He had determined it to be a barrier ward, designed specifically to block specific magical signatures. It was unclear what criteria it was using for denying students access however: The ward had blocked students from every house, almost in equal numbers. The tired and sore potions master had to grudgingly admit that this was beyond "no-talent, attention seeking" Potter's ability to cast. Dumbledore knew he would eventually subvert or overwhelm the ward. After all, he was the greatest wizard of at least, the century.

Colin's smile would have made the Grand Canyon look like a crack in the pavement as he ascended in to the bathroom with his camera still in hand, and two roles of film in his pocket only to be pounced by Dumbledore, "Ah. Mr. Creevy. I would be most interested in seeing the photographs that you have taken tonight."

Colin faltered for a moment, but his smile never wavered, "I'm sorry headmaster but, I signed a contract with Harry, The Quibbler and the Gringotts Goblins were witnesses." The smile on Dumbledore's face faltered for a moment.

"What utter rubbish! You're too young to sign any kind of contract," retorted Snape, with his customary sneer fixed on his face as disdain dripped from every syllable.

Harry chose that moment to intervene on the young man's behalf, "He may be. However, Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick both witnessed the terms of the contract, and she signed on his behalf. The Quibbler now has exclusive rights until the summer."

Colin was suddenly grinning like an Azkaban escape, "I'm going to get my pictures published!" Colin was not too worried about the money from the deal. He was already rich from the Basilisk, "I am now the only person allowed to take Harry's picture! I would have paid any amount of money for this opportunity!"

"You would have signed over your soul," commented Professor McGonagall, "if Harry had asked you for it." Her dry tone held the barest trace of humor "Is there a problem headmaster?"

Thinking on his feet, he redirected her line of inquiry, hoping to deflect the somewhat unwanted attention, "We were just discussing Mr. Creevey's contract and why you felt that there was no need to inform me of the business negotiations?"

"I felt confident in my ability to handle the negotiations and Mr. Creevey has the opportunity a beloved hobby in to a career for one Galleon. He will receive accreditation for his work and payment as a percentage of sales." She turned her eyes on Snape for a moment, "Harry actions in the past prove that his honor and integrity are beyond common reproach – unlike some."

Amongst the last to emerge from the underground were Harry, Hermione and Luna deep in conversation with Griphook. Dumbledore was only able to hear snippets of the conversation and was left wondering what they were up to, inside his castle, "...within an hour?"

"...geomancers...simple enough....our own magi for some of the other enchantments..."

"What kind?" asked Hermione. They drifted close enough to the headmaster for him to overhear snatches of conversation.

"Chronological..." said Griphook, "...secrets of the Goblin Nation, and are not mine to share," he turned to Harry.

Harry shrugged pragmatically, "I won't pretend to not be curious, but if it's not your secret, it's not your secret." Hermione pouted in protest at the knowledge that seemed to be slipping away from her, "You're cute when you do that," said Harry as he gently kissed her. She blushed and the goblin smiled. Catching sight of the Goblin's smile, Griphook wagged his eyebrows and she blushed again.

They stopped as Griphook addressed the wizard standing before them, "Headmaster Dumbledore, I trust that you are aware that the Champions accommodations and training grounds are for the champion to choose. Mr. Potter has chosen, and Gringotts will be outfitting the Chamber of Secrets as his the site for his residence for the duration of the tournament." The Goblin smiled without showing teeth, "It would be an exercise in poor judgment for any to attempt to circumvent the wards and other protections for as a goblin champion, goblin law will be enforced in the protection of his residence."

The headmaster proceeded to spend over an hour, cautiously probing the protections in place. Whatever barrier had prevented him and Severus from descending had vanished, but upon exiting at the bottom of the stairs, Dumbledore found himself facing four of the Agaas Muukuur Hor. They were standing at the far end of the torch light corridor that lead he presumed, to the chamber itself. He drew his wand cautiously, and was quick to note that the Goblin drew their weapons with equal caution. A few probing and scanning charms later, the pair retreated upon confirming that the defenses were exactly as Griphook had said.

The rest of the day passed in a whirlwind of classes that Harry found himself very distracted in due to the blend of questions and insults that peppered him. The only two lessons where nobody dared say anything snide or interrupt were Defense against the Dark Arts and Transfigurations because nobody wanted to wind up as a Malfoy-esque ferret or cross the Scottish transfiguration professor.

Hermione and Harry escorted Luna from her last class of the day to her dormitory. Before she could pack, she had to sort through a pile of hastily returned belongings, "Seems like everyone who took something has returned it," there was a dreamy quality to her voice as if she hadn't minded any of it. The slight shift in Harry's posture made it clear that he was not happy. The couple stood guard as she packed her trunk, shrunk it and dropped it in her pocket, "I'm ready." They left without a word or a backward glance to the very edgy students of Ravenclaw house, who collectively released the breath they were holding as their common room door slammed.

They were met at the entrance to their new home by a Griphook, who took great delight in playing tour guide from the magically expanded entrance hall onwards, "Goblins believe that the best place to prepare an offense, or conduct a defense is underground, where everything can be used to aid you. Your quarters are secure as Gringotts itself." He directed them to their respective suites and bade the tired teenager's goodnight. He stepped in to the floo and returned to the bank where he had a progress report to write for the council.

Half an hour later, Harry was leafing through a book when there was a knock at the door, "Come in," he said, placing the book on the bedside table. He was surprised to see Luna instead of Hermione, "Luna? Everything alright?"

She seemed, unsure of herself, "That's just it Harry.... I don't know," she sat at the foot of the bed, and just stared at the far wall for a moment, composing herself as Harry pretended not to notice her wiping away a stray tear, "I just, want to say thank you... you can't know how much this, means to me..."

"Actually I do," replied Harry quietly, "I don't know what everyone else thinks or knows... even Hermione... I've not had the chance to tell her about Privet Drive."

"That where you live with your muggle relatives?" he nodded, and she shook her head the moment he started to speak, "I don't want to know. Ok... that is a lie. I do want to know but Hermione should know first. She's your girlfriend Harry Potter, and she has more of a right to know that I do... even if we do have some things in common." He blinked, just as she leaned forward and kissed him on

the cheek, "That's a story for another time, maybe. But, thank you all the same. Good night Harry."

She was out the door, and it clicked softly as it closed. He was lost in thought, wondering exactly what she meant by that... and wondered what that meant until Hermione turned up looking for a goodnight kiss that lasted almost ten minutes...

In the village of Little Hangleton, the Riddle House was a monument of crumbling ruin and decay, instead of what it should have been. In one of the few room where the fireplace still worked, the partially restored Dark Lord of Great Britain, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named sat or perhaps more accurately hunched on a large armchair, facing the fireplace. He let the flames ward him against the cold as he waited.

Behind the door was where muggle Frank Bryce had listened in on their plans for the Triwizard Tournament lurked Peter "Wormtail" Pettigrew. Voldemort could feel the man's presence and more importantly, he could smell fear: Wormtail feared bringing his master bad news.

The first part of the plan had worked surprisingly well. They had captured Barty Crouch Senior and released his son from the Imperius Curse. They now had the agent in Hogwarts, who provided the bad news Wormtail bore, "Master, I bring word from your agent," he hesitated, "Potter has used the tournament to his own ends. He has formed an alliance with the Goblins, who are now his sponsors for the tournament... he has been granted partial emancipation and claimed the Potter Family Vault."

Silence stretched out, consuming the minutes in much the way Nagini had consumed the muggle caretaker. Silence was never a good sign, and Peter Pettigrew found himself wondering, yet again, how he could have been so abysmally stupid as to think that being a Death Eater would grant him wealth and power. "You did not foresee this?" he snarled, "Crucio!"

He was not sure how long he was under the curse as knives, needles and broken glass set every nerve aflame. A cold clinically detached and distant part of his mind remembered the future of wealth and power he had imagined when he took the Dark Mark.

Instead, he had spent thirteen years as a rat and six months as a nursemaid....

Chapter 5

Command the present

Harry Potter awoke, and something, just did not seem right. It was not that he did not know where he was. He knew he was in the Chamber of Secrets almost a mile in the bedrock and foundations of the castle. Something was in the room. Something in the room was watching him, watching him closely. His hand slid beneath his pillow, wrapping around his wand when the high-pitched overly excited shout erupted in his ear, "Harry Potter! Sir!"

He knew that voice, almost too well. It belonging to the individual that had haunted his entire second year, nearly gotten him expelled, his arm broken, and then also bore part of the responsibility for said broken arm being deboned by Lockhart. "Dobby.... What in Merlin's name are you doing here?" asked the groggy teen, "I thought you were working in the castle kitchens..."

"I was. Sir! Griphook spoke to Dobby yesterday about working for Harry Potter for the tournament! Sir! Dobby works for Harry Potter now! Sir!" The awe and delight in the elf's voice brought a glimmer of a smile to Harry's face. He was wondering just how much of a chuckle and chortle Griphook was having right this instant. It was hard to stay grumpy around such an excited and happy creature and he sat up and stretched, only to find his clothes neatly lain out across the back and seat of a nearby chair. Smacking his lips, he ambled across the room to the ensuite bathroom for quick shower before his morning workout until he glanced at his watch and groaned. He had overslept again. He made a mental note to have Dobby start waking him every day.

Half an hour later, a freshly showered and dressed Harry headed out of his room to explore his home between now and the end of the school year. The residence was already showing signs of life, in the form of Luna and Colin in conversation over the pictures scattered across the dining table in a haphazard yet organized manner. Hermione watched the two with the hint of a smile on her face. "Morning, you sleep alright?"

Harry would need to speak to Griphook about adding Colin to his retinue formally, and to arrange regular private instruction to teach him, and the rest of his retinue if they were interested. While he did

not have end of year tests to worry about, the others did and even he had OWLs next year. Uncertain of how exactly one greets their girlfriend in the morning, he kissed her on the cheek and she turned her head to give him a gentle kiss as well. Definitely, a better way to start the morning than finding an over excitable house elf in your bedroom.

"We're just waiting for the quibbler to arrive, but while we wait, just look at these," Luna handed Harry one of the many short stacks, "Colin's got a great eye for this!" The younger Gryffindor blushed at the praise, and Harry decided not to add anything.

The Ravenclaw had lost none of her dreamy expression as her quill scratched its way across the parchment, "My father was thrilled when he heard that I'd gotten him exclusive access to you. We're considered small time, next to the Prophet because we do more fun, jokey stuff. But this is our chance to drop that kind of thing and become a serious paper."

Letting them carry on, he went exploring and found that the residence lived up to its name. The gym was fully fitted with exercise machines and equipment that Harry had seen in muggle gyms and stores, with a proper dueling area as well. He found the small potions lab well stocked by his rather limited knowledge of the subject and a kitchen occupied by Dobby cooking enough breakfast for twelve.

Another area held a sauna and Jacuzzi big enough for a dozen people. Harry blushed at some of the thoughts flirting through his mind. His last stop was the library and he found a place that would have Hermione and quite possibly Luna drooling. Bookshelves lined the walls and several more ran up and down the middle of the room. Tucked in a corner were a number of comfortable looking arm chairs with a fireplace where a merry blaze crackled away, giving the place a very homey feel.

Rejoining his friends, they debated whether to go up to the castle for breakfast but the mouth water scents of Dobby's cooking convinced them not to disappoint the house elf. Harry did find a quiet moment for a certain friend, "Luna, if you ever want to talk, about ... Ravenclaw," Harry quietly found himself wondering why it was so hard to get the words out. He knew what he wanted to say, but still did not quite know how to phrase it, "I, we both know what it's like...

so if you ever want to talk about it... I've always got room for more friends." The girl blushed, mumbled her thanks, and hurried to the dining room. "Dobby," The elf appeared with a barely heard pop, "Please inform Griphook that I would like to meet him. Thank you." With a nod, the elf popped away.

Moments later, the goblin appeared in to the living room via the fireplace, "Harry! I am surprised to hear from you so early in the morning. Is everything alright?"

"Everything is fine Griphook. I just wanted to say thank you, for," He waved a hand around the room, "well, for this and also, I want to make certain arrangements, regarding instructors, tutors and classes."

Griphook grinned, "I have already taken the liberty of contacting your former Defense against the Dark Arts Professor: Remus Lupin. He will be arriving this evening. He enquired if it would be alright to bring a dog," the Goblin seemed to be examining a piece of parchment only he could see, "Snuffles." Harry and Hermione broke in to almost identical grins, noted by the Goblin, "I will return this evening, if there is nothing else?"

When they entered the school, there was silence and clearly, he caused it, because of the front page of the Quibbler. Liberating a copy, he let his eyes scan the headline:

Gringott's Champion Harry Potter.

The pictures highlighted not only the head of the Basilisk, but also himself, Hermione and Luna standing just in front of its slack jaws and lolling tongue. A series of pictures further down the page showed the goblin apothecaries at work and gave a better indication as to the size of the beast. The article was short, almost functionary given that the pictures were worth several thousand words.

Harry Potter, the only known survivor of the avada kedeva curse has been bestowed with more titles and accolades than he is years old. Interestingly enough, Mr. Potter or "just call me Harry," shuns the media, limelight and above all else, public scrutiny.

However, his involuntary participation in the Triwizard Tournament means that privacy is no longer an option for the fourteen-year-old

wizard who has been granted partial emancipation for the duration of the tournament. However, Harry had only this to say, "The responsible adults, my guardians have failed me for perhaps the last time. Someone entered me against my will in to a competition for adults and all those responsible adults insist I must compete as part of a binding magical contract."

The young man has already faced down a Cerberus (details on page 2), a Basilisk (page 3), and the feared Dementors of Azkaban (page 4) during his three years at Hogwarts. This reporter can confirm the validity of these statements, and if one has any doubts, ask the Goblins. Harry Potter, having acknowledged that Mr. Cedric Diggory of Hufflepuff House as the Hogwarts Triwizard Champion represents the "Urzk-Khou Garabash Huzkagai" or Gringotts in the Triwizard Tournament.

His first act of finding a sponsor, his second was to contact the Quibbler and grant us exclusivity rights and access for the duration of the Triwizard tournament. His third was to sell his Basilisk – by right of conquest – and arrange compensation to be paid to the monster's victims, and for substantial donations to be made to muggle, wizarding and goblin charities of a worthy cause as determined by Senior Accounts Manager Griphook of Gringotts.

Gringotts will also be serving a number of writs on Mr. Potter's behalf to crack down on those minting gold through illegal use of his image and name. "My name, my image, my life story goes in to products that I know nothing about and have no association to me. It ends now. The only publication with the rights to my picture and my story is the Quibbler. Anyone else can face the wrath of Gringotts Wizarding Bank." He added, "And good luck to them," as an afterthought, perhaps even a warning to those who have exploited him in the past.

We at the Quibbler are understandably delighted with this arrangement and believe that it was gold well spent, and look forward to long and mutually beneficial relationship with Mr. Potter. The Quibbler wishes him well for the coming tournament.

Classes that day were somewhat tense for the new trio. Harry and Hermione were somewhat used to the attention or lack thereof but Luna was getting something akin to a wide berth from her housemates, as they realized just whom her friends were.

Nevertheless, the day progressed without incident even if they were the subject of numerous stares from the staff table.

Seated at the Slytherin house table, Draco Malfoy was pondering his next move. The split between Potty and Weasley seemed to be permanent. The Mudblood had sided with the famous one so it made sense that Weasley was on his own. Even Draco had grudgingly admitted that standing up to Snape and then Dumbledore had won respect from a great many of the students, including those within his own house. Then, acknowledging that Diggory was Hogwarts champion had swayed more support and then there was the "Goblin Alliance."

Things took a decided turn for the worse as the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs he had working for him, stopped by the table and dropped the galleons on the table, along with a small sack, "Fifty badges and you can have them. We don't want your money!" Either they respect Potter more than him, or they did not fear him enough. Neither one was good.

That evening the trio was having a relaxed, easy night, perusing several different tomes from the residence library when Dobby popped in unannounced, "Harry Potter sir, the goblins report that Professor Lupin and Snuffles are waiting outside."

He turned to both Griphook and Luna and took a deep breath, "There are a lot of secrets that, that Hermione, Ron and I used to have. We discussed it," the "we" obviously referred to Harry and Hermione. Ron was back at the burrow, and would remain there for a while yet, "and agreed that you deserve to know the truth about some of the lies in the wizarding world. Just... well do you trust me? I mean us?"

Luna smiled, the same dreamy smile, "I trust you Harry..." It no longer fooled the couple that the dreamy smiles and distant, almost vacant looks in her eyes were more of an act, armor that kept the hurt she felt from showing through. Luna watched as the massive black dog bounded into the room and flattened Harry before attempting to drown him in slobber. Hermione buckled in laughter as the evening became one of reunions between Remus and Harry and to an extent Hermione, "Ms. Lovegood," said Remus, "Harry did not mention that in addition to being a close friend, that you were a strikingly beautiful young lady as well."

She blushed and found that she liked their former Defense against the Dark Arts professor even more, especially since he simply accepted Luna without comment. Simple acceptance was something she had not known from anyone but her father. Within the hour, the four were at ease and Professor Remus Lupin was private instructor and tutor to the Gringotts Champion and his retinue.

"Sirius," he said clearly, talking to the massive black shaggy dog, "You are amongst friends here."

When the unregistered animagus arched his back and stretched, only the sight of the grinning professor and her laughing friend cut Luna's scream short. It was only when the Goblin's of the Agaari Gharaar Muukuur Hor stormed in, weapons drawn with the edges lit by enchantments, did Harry react, "Khlaz dom!" shouted Harry and the Goblins halted in mid-stride but kept their weapons drawn, "All who stand within the residence are welcome as family and friends." The Goblins said nothing, but returned to their posts.

"I didn't know you speak Goblin Harry," said Hermione quietly, wondering what other secrets and surprises her boyfriend had in store for her.

He grinned at his girlfriend, "I don't. Griphook taught me a couple of basic phrases. But," he added thoughtfully, "I wouldn't mind learning to speak the language." He turned to Luna, "Luna... you've just met the Quibbler's next major story."

"Harry," said Luna, eyeing the shaggy haired man, a touch of fear in her voice, "That is Sirius Black." Then the possibilities dawned, "This is Sirius Black!" She grabbed a parchment and quill and began asking a dozen questions a second. Luna was aware that the Quibbler printing Sirius Black's story would cause more than a little trouble with the ministry. Luna decided she would have to speak to Harry about allowing her father to visit, because this was one story with vast repercussions. It would redefine how people viewed the Quibbler and place them in direct opposition to the Ministry and its fourteen-year long cover up.

They talked last night and decided to wait until lunchtime before entering the castle. They were not worried about missing some classes, with the facilities they had here and now a live-in professor,

catching up with anything they missed would require some hard work, but not too much.

Harry came down to breakfast to find his godfather and girlfriend waiting on him, he gave Hermione a good morning kiss and any blush on his cheeks was purely down to remembering the way she had kissed him last night before going to bed. "My breakfast doesn't need any more sugar. So just stop it there," said Sirius, the beginning of a smile on his face. They were a good match he thought, and knew that Harry's parents would approve.

Griphook appeared just to check up on things and Harry invited him to stay for breakfast. Despite the fact that the Goblin had already eaten, he sat and helped himself to a cup of tea content to let the conversation wash over him. Sirius wanted to know what Harry's plan was for the tournament, and his brutal assessment of the situation, "Survive it" gave them all a little something to chew on, which Luna took advantage of, "Harry, could my dad come here and interview Sirius? We should be able to get people asking questions about his imprisonment, which would help him get a trial."

It was Griphook who answered, "Ms. Lovegood, should you print such an interview, the ministry would arrest all of us and interrogate us to ascertain his location. They are desperate to end the "Black Situation." The Goblin had actually used air quotes.

Hermione was quick to offer a possible solution, "What about an interview with Harry and me? We've told the ministry the truth at the end of last year, but they didn't believe it.... Snape had the Ministry convinced we were under the effect of a confundus charm. You can report the truth as the result of our interview, and additional research."

Luan looked pensive for a moment, "Could I send Dobby to ask what my father thinks?" The elf was all smiles as he popped to the office of the Quibbler, to arrange a meeting for later the following morning. Sirius knew he would not be staying for long after the interview. There were just too many risks for everyone and even the Goblins and Gringotts would face censure if discovered. Harry had not liked it, but in the end had accepted his godfather's choice. They exchanged a brief hug, Harry promised to write and the black, grim-like canine vanished in the floo with Griphook by his side.

When the occupants of the residents left that afternoon, the smiling eye twinkling headmaster ambushed them. He was desperate to avoid being at odds with Harry and wanted to smooth over their damaged relationship, "Harry, I am happy to see you still attend some of your classes." Harry flinched slightly at the subtle rebuke, but said nothing. "But I'm afraid that other students are still my responsibility and I cannot in good conscience allow them to live outside their respective house dormitories."

Harry met the twinkling eyes and though 'Mione placed a hand on his arm, he did not pull his verbal punches, "Responsibilities eh? Where was your sense of responsibility when it came to giving my godfather a trial?" The boy was gone, replaced by a wizard who had his eyes open. She realized that he had meant every word about how the adults in his life had not only failed him, but also failed to protect the little family that he had left.

"No charges were brought against my godfather who suffered in Azkaban. Twelve years surrounded by Dementors," Harry shuddered involuntarily, "I know my rights as Champion. I know my responsibilities as Champion – no thanks to you – and I take the well being of my friends, in or out of my retinue, far more seriously than you believe." There was acidity to his words that left Dumbledore speechless, "I have advisors who think about me and those I care about. You have failed my parents and my godfather and then me. Eleven years alone in a place where I am actively hunted and hated! Eleven years without anything to tell me who I am or what I really am. ..." he stopped, trying to fight back the wave of emotion that threatened to overwhelm him. "Pick and choose your responsibilities as you please. I will not!"

"Harry there is so much going on at the moment that I feel we could benefit from sitting down and talking to each other, to help clear the air."

It was clear that there would be no fence mending for now, and Dumbledore decided that he had a few owls to send, and a few favors to call in, just in case he needed them. Knowledge is power. Dumbledore studied the backs of the teens, and knew he needed something monumental to get back on their good side.

Exempt from end of term tests though he was, that did not mean that Harry was free from the ignominy of certain classes, and that

included a wonderful way to spoil the middle of the week. Wednesday saw divination with Sybil Trelawney, where she dramatically predicted his death. After the three form of death, Harry simply tuned out the rest of the class. Charms went by and he barely noticed, given his poor mood over the headmaster. It was the afternoon lesson that really grated against his nerves: Double Potions, with the Slytherins.

Where the Gryffindors had been mostly supportive, some of the Ravensclaws had come around shortly, but most stood stubbornly to their old ways, and continued to target Luna, having added the justification that she was a traitor to their house. The Hufflepuffs, were unsurprisingly, four square behind their own champion, and clearly were not about to budge in support of Harry which suited him just fine. The Slytherins however, made it clear where they stood. Lining up outside Snape's dungeon, Harry found himself staring down the entire Slytherin 4th years, all of whom bore badges that stated:

Support Cedric Diggory

The REAL Hogwarts Champion!

"You like them, Potter?" drawled Malfoy loudly as Harry approached, "And this isn't all they do – Look!" He pressed his badge and the message vanished, replacing by one that glowed bright green:

Potter stinks!

No one can stand some things. And the howling laughter of the gathered Slytherin's caused the heat to rise in Harry's face and neck, "Oh very funny," Hermione said sarcastically to Pansy and her gang of Slytherin girls, laughing louder and harder than anyone else, "I suppose it reflects both the level of intelligence and maturity of Slytherin in general! Cedric is the only Champion for Hogwarts and "Potter stinks?" First Year Ravensclaws help you come up with that?"

Malfoy was still laughing as he mockingly extended a badge, "Care to join the winning team Granger?"

It was her turn to laugh, "Malfoy, the mere presence of a Slytherin in the competition must have made the Goblet toes – if it had any –

curl. Even if I wanted to join you, there is no team, to join or support!"

Draco froze up for a second as the Gryffindors burst in to laughter, "Shut up Mudblood!"

Harry's anger, kept very carefully in check by a watchful Hermione, had been building: First against the tournament organizers and then the headmaster, then Snape and now Draco Malfoy seemed to think that he could get his thrills from taking cheap shots. His wand was suddenly in Harry's hand and pointed straight at Draco, who responded in kind, "Go on then, Potter, nobody around to protect you. Do you have the guts? That vaunted Gryffindor courage?"

For a split second, they met each other's eye, and then both of them acted.

"Funnunculus!" shouted Harry

"Densaugeo!" screamed Malfoy.

Snape chose precisely that moment to make his presence felt as the curses intercepted each other and bounced off. Harry's curse struck Goyle in the face, and Malfoy's unfortunate found a better target than Harry: Hermione.

In moments, her teeth were growing, and it would not be long before they went down past her collar as Snape began his usually arbitrary assignment of punishment. "Detention Potter!" Harry was not paying attention, "and fifty points from Gryffindor!" oiled the Potions Master. Harry already had his back on all of them, comforting his girlfriend as he took two steps away, "Either you get in to my classroom, or I'll make it a hundred points and a week's detention!" he froze in mid-step and met Hermione's eye for the barest of moments. His wand vibrated, as something green and black slithered down its length but no one seemed to notice that, focused as they were on Harry's next move. Hermione shook her head and took off, no doubt to the hospital wing. It took every fiber of his being, not to smash the "professor" in the face as he stalked in to what he knew was going to be a very, very long afternoon.

Fortunately, Colin arrived shortly after the lesson began to pull him Harry out of class for the Weighing of the Wands ceremony where

Rita Skeeter hounded him incessantly from the moment he walked in the room. He stayed quiet, well aware of the terms of his agreement with the Quibbler. Rita however, did not know when to quit and she pushed him too far. Harry drew his wand and rounded on the reporter. The other three champions simply stared as his wand rose. Karkaroff and Maxime went for their wands only to witness Harry summon one of Gringotts messenger fire sprites.

Within minutes, a quartet of Goblins warriors with their blades drawn stormed the room and detained Ms. Skeeter at blade point, and forcibly removed the reporter. Everyone, Mr. Olivander included were shocked as Harry stood by and let one of the goblins clobber both Rita and her cameraman across the back of the head with the flat of his axe. "Guess my wand still works," thought Harry as he met the mixed stares that ranged from surprise and shock to mild amusement, "Bitch had it coming," said Harry by way of explanation before running to catch up with the others for dinner.

Dinner was a quiet affair with three Weaselys and Luna – or as quiet and safe as possible with the Prank Master Generals seated at your table. Hermione was still in the Hospital Wing. Fortunately, Luna was a calming influence and the jokes of the twins tuned out the gossiping, whisperings, and finger pointing until Professor McGonagall descended upon his end of the Gryffindor table under orders to move Luna back to the Ravenclaw table.

"Professor McGonagall," said Harry evenly, "I've examined the rules and regulations of Hogwarts, and no where does it say that students must sit at their house tables?" A glance towards the staff table confirmed that Dumbledore was watching, and in rankled that the headmaster did not seem to have anything better to do than stare at him. Harry blinked and grinned, almost evilly, "Professor Flitwick! May I have a few minutes?"

Although Luna was unwilling to admit to anything, Harry's brief explanation of the situation caused more than one raised eyebrow at the Gryffindor table as the diminutive professor glared over at his own house table, "I will conduct a formal investigation in to this matter Harry. Thank you for bringing it to my attention. I only wish... it had been brought up sooner."

Luna was quickest off the mark, "You didn't know, sir, and I never said anything to you. I had ample opportunity over the years," the

strange, ethereal quality in her voice had swept to the fore, lending her words an air of compassionate understanding, something Harry could very well relate to, "Now that you know, you'll do the right thing. That's what matters most."

Professor Flitwick nodded his thanks and turned to Harry, "Mr. Potter, though I cannot condone your participation in the tournament, I offer to you my services as an instructor, should you require them."

Professor McGonagall found herself in agreement, considering the sheer absurdity of Albus Dumbledore. No fourteen-year-old boy to compete in a tournament against not only those older than him but who also held the edge in spell lore, magical ability and physical strength. "I have no knowledge of the tasks in this tournament Harry. And though it embarrasses me to say that I did not think of it sooner, I extend you the same offer as an instructor in transfiguration or any other area you think I may be of some assistance."

"Thank you both professors, for you kind offers. I am," Harry said with a grin, "a great many things but I am no fool. I most willingly accept." He spared a glance towards the Ravenclaw table and they seemed to realize that they were in trouble, a particular group of girls that had Cho Chang as their ringleader.

Albus seemed to have snap-apparated across the hall, suddenly standing quite close to them, "I would also like to offer my services..." He was suddenly aware that he had just committed a tactical error. The boy's eyes tighten and flash a dangerous shade of green for an instant. There was a subtle twitching in his right hand as well, as if he wanted to go for his wand. Subtle though the motion was no one could have missed it.

"No." You could have dropped a pin in the Great Hall, and heard it land in the aftermath of that single word. "You've done enough," growled Harry, "to make Hogwarts unsafe."

That hit home, and the headmaster was actually hurt by that remark, "Harry, I agree that we have our differences, but how can you say that?"

"Let's see," replied Harry, "On the subject of "defense professors," Harry copied Griphook and employed air quotes, "The first tried to kill me, the second tried to obliviate me." He raised his voice, "The

most recent one has used an Imperius Curse on me as part of his idea of "Constant Vigilance," Can someone hit me with a Cruciatus Curse so I can have the Unforgivable Curse Collector Set?"

Despite the silencing charms at the staff table, the hand signals and gestures made it clear that the headmaster was going to have his hands full until well after breakfast.

Sitting at the Ravenclaw table, Fleur Delacour realized that she had sold the young man short. Mr. Potter was a powerful wizard, very, very wealthy with a temper and anger management issues – everyone had heard about what had happened outside Snape's Dungeon. With her Veela blessing, she felt confident that not only could she wrap him around her little finger, but convince him that the Beuaxbatton Academy in France would be perfect to finish his education. Nothing could stand in the way of even a part Veela with an eye for a mate.

Ronald Weasley was blind to all the intrigue at Hogwarts, involving professors, students, headmasters and Veela, on suspension until November 18, one week before the first task. Suspended for two weeks! The redhead was fuming, almost apoplectic with rage. He was unsurprised to find that McGonagall had sided with Harry, but to have both his parents turn on him as well! Was the entire world against him suddenly? The narrow-minded young man could not even contemplate the possibility that all of the injustices were the product of his own skewed perception.

He reasoned that Hermione was not and would never be the most attractive of witches - Lavender Brown, Padma and Patil, Cho Chang, Daphne Greengrass all came to mind - but she have waited for him to ask her out, date a bit, snog a lot and then move on. Now Potter had taken her from him. Potter had taken everything he had ever seen or wanted and put in beyond his grasp. He clenched his fists in frustration and punched the wall, adding another crater to the wall. Something else he blamed Potter for: His confinement to his room as if sentenced to Azkaban.

The bottom line, for Ron was that everything he wanted had been stolen or denied by Harry "the bloody git" James "girlfriend stealer" Potter! The same person had turned even his own family against him. Though he was unwilling to admit it, it seemed as if Draco was right, and what made that worse, right all along.

Peter Pettigrew was not having a good day. He had hopes that delivering nothing but good news would allow him to escape Cruciatus free at least this once, "Master, I bring word from your servant. He says that Potter's relationship with the headmaster has taken a dramatic turn for the worst and that the boy no longer trusts him. They even had an argument in public."

The dry chuckle eased some of Peter's fears, as his master was in a good mood, something he preferred to a bad one, "It took him longer than I thought it would, but he has finally done it. This should not only make it an interesting year but also make out plans that much easier to carry out. The plan, takes priority over everything!" concluded Voldemort.

Peter was beginning to count his blessings when he remembered that when dealing with the Dark Lord, one should not put all their eggs in to one basket as the Cruciatus curse slammed him to the floor where he writhed in agony for only a few moments, "Remember Wormtail. If you have lied to me, you will suffer my full wrath and displeasure."

"Yes master," was all Peter could croak out before crawling from the room, wondering why he had been foolish enough to become a death eater, and why he now still stayed, when he could just run, and never look back.

There were no bright moments, or positive highlights on this particularly trying day, for Harry as he scrubbed the cauldrons out without magic in the potions dungeon. He found himself strangely enjoying the task as it let him burn off a great deal of excess energy, and vent some of his frustrations and anger. By the time, he was done, and Snape was satisfied, the tired teenager retreated to his quarters and collapsed on his bed, not even bothering to say good night or even to change.

Harry slept deeply and dreamlessly unaware of the danger lurking in the wings...

Chapter 6

War and Romance

The day dawned and Harry was confused, puzzled almost when Hermione was nowhere... He had completed his morning run, taken a shower and had gotten used to the good morning kiss from his girlfriend. There was, in his mind simply no better way to start any day of the week. Luna, and Colin – the most recent full time addition to his retinue – were content to watch him search the Residence until finally Luna took pity on him, "Harry, you've no experience with women." She pronounced.

He looked at her as if she really was loony, and then checked himself. He shrugged sheepishly, "Is it that obvious?" Luna smiled, "I'm in trouble aren't I?" the smile broadened, and Colin wisely found that he needed to use the bathroom, "What did I do?" her smile collapsed like a house of cards.

How can he not know? She wondered, and then the a few pieces of the puzzle fell in to place for the Ravenclaw. After all, Ravenclaws were trained to think, analyze, hypothesize and the test the validity of their own logical formulation, "Hermione was injured yesterday, and you, well, you never checked on her... it hurts when your boyfriend doesn't seem to care..." she left her sentence unfinished and watched as it all fell in to place for the young wizard. It was the look on his face, he didn't have to say it, he was already begging for it before he could open his mouth, "Start with an apology, then something romantic..." she said, glancing at her watch, "I have to get to class. "

She left Harry alone on the verge of panic, and in that moment of panic he turned to the only source of assistance readily available, "Dobby!" he shouted. When he laid out the sordid tale for Moony, and Padfoot, and Griphook, the three were outright laughing, or discreetly chuckling like one house elf at just how clueless he was when it came to dealing with a girlfriend. "With a friend, you don't have to visit especially since you had detention with the greasy git," explained Padfoot, "With a girlfriend, it's different."

Fortunately for him, he had enough help to set things up before he dragged his thoughts, worry and concern from his girlfriend to the day's assignments - and he had quite a few. From Moony, he had

three years of charms, transfiguration and defense to get through. Griphook left something a single, slim volume entitled, "Gharlen ac Dar: Daan Har" or "Magic and War: The Path" that he would have to read, understand, and summarize the key points of each chapter before their next meeting.

It was just after five in the evening when Harry dispatched the note by fire sprite, and then made his way to his bedroom to for a shower and change of clothes. Defense had been easy enough to review - there was only one year of work to do. Charms and transfiguration had not taken as long as he had thought thanks to the notes he had managed to create and then had Hermione check through from previous years. He still however, had the entire book from Griphook, waiting for him.

The young woman was actually lost, deep in thought, tapping her quill idly against the parchment. She was supposed to be writing a foot long essay on the uses of cheering charms. She had written two inches of text and three inches of sprinkled ink. She kept replaying the conversation that she had with the Headmaster yesterday, during her unfortunate confinement to the hospital wing. The damage done by Malfoy's misfired curse had caused her teeth to swell and grow painfully large, and it had taken Madame Pomfrey some time to counter the curse then carefully remove the overly large and inflamed teeth before beginning the painful process of growing the fourteen affected teeth with a variation of the skele-gro potion.

It was then that the headmaster of Hogwarts made his appearance for a friendly talk. Unfortunately, the talk she had with Dumbledore had been one sided in the extreme, considering that she was in no way capable of actually answering any of his questions. It had developed in to a rather bizarre game of yes and no. No she could not condone the many things that Albus Dumbledore had done in his misguided attempts to keep Harry safe. Nor could she overlook a number of other things, including shoddy teaching - Defense against the Dark Arts, Magical History and Divination, which she gladly abandoned, came to mind. Nor could she forgive what he had almost done to Luna, or for allowing Professor Snape to actually set foot in the castle, let alone pretend to teach when in fact he lectured – and lectured badly.

While she could not condone the many mistakes that Dumbledore had made, she could try to understand the reasoning why he had done, what he had done. Moreover, the fatherly professor had spent several hours trying to convince her of his intentions, what he hoped to achieve and why. She had kept track of her questions on a piece of parchment and had, disturbingly received answers to nearly all of her questions that left her reeling. Suffice to say that by the time he was done speaking and surreptitiously waving his wand, she was once again a firm supporter in everything that he hoped to accomplish: Defeat Voldemort with Harry and prevent him from becoming the next Dark Lord. He had convinced Hermione that as Harry's girlfriend, she had a responsibility to do what was right, for the greater good, by any means necessary.

However, on the topic her boyfriend, she could not deny that she did it hurt. He had never shown up, not even bothered to check on her, and not even bothered to ask Luna how she was doing! It was as if he had never noticed her absence at all. Her insecurities rushed forward once again, and this time really threatened to slam her down.

When the fire sprite had flashed in to existence on her desk, she jumped knocking over her ink. Hands coated in black ink, a quick charm and she opened the note from her absentee boyfriend, "It's about time!" she thought crossly as she read the note. She glanced at her watch and realized that she had about an hour and a half, to get ready, "Something nice, but not too dressy."

Her first guess was Luna, but the Ravenclaw, when questioned had said nothing about her conversation with Harry that morning. Left with an hour, she hurried up to her dorm to shower, change and to figure out what exactly she could do with her normally untamable hair.

He was reading "Gharlen ac Dar: Daan Har" and found it simply fascinating, intertwining history, culture, and how it all tied to the Goblin's relationship with magic. It was perhaps two hundred or so pages, but it was fascinating reading. It explained how magic, simply is. Light magic or dark magic does not exist. It is the caster's intention that gives magic its good or evil attributes. Even that was a vague business. The simplest of levitation spells – wingardium leviosa – could levitate a person off the side of a building. The Imperius curse could prevent someone from committing suicide.

Avada Kedavra grants a quick and painless death to the terminal ill, the grievously wounded, or to simply to cull livestock.

The bottom line was that magic exists and can be tapped by a wizard or witch or any other creature - not necessarily human - and bent to their intent. Intent made magic "light" or "dark." It helped clear several misconceptions from the young man's mind, but also fudged the boundaries of morality somewhat.

Dobby popped in, "Excuse me, Master Harry, but Ms. Granger will be with you momentarily." Nodding his thanks, Harry stood, a little uncomfortable in the new shirt and pants and he made a note that next time he would have to go shopping himself. The house elf had changed, noted Harry. Gone was the excitable - well over-excited - House elf. Now he was the epitome of the perfect, professional. Harry wondered what the Dursley's would make of him having the magical equivalent of a butler at quite literally his simple call.

He greeted Hermione with a smile and a hug, which she somewhat hesitantly returned. He just held her close and whispered quietly "I'm sorry. I was just so self absorbed yesterday. I was an idiot." Hermione was not sure what exactly she should say to the frank and honest admission of guilt, and did the only thing that made any real sense.

"Apology accepted," she whispered back and the two exchanged a brief kiss as they wandered out on to the grounds of the castle, "Tell me something: Where are we going?"

He grinned, "I thought we'd take a walk along the lake, enjoy the sunset," he grinned, "To start." They did just that, taking time to enjoy a quiet walk, along the lake, following a candle lit path that terminated in a small glen where there was a table setup for a quiet romantic candle lit dinner for two. Nothing simpler or more complicated than a proper first date without the glare and scrutiny of the media, without comments, without people pointing and staring and gawking. Suffice to say the evening was a memory for them both to treasure, one summon a powerful Patronus.

Two days later, Harry returned from his morning circuits of the black lake, to find the Goblin waiting for him just outside the Residence, "I was going to suggest that we begin by assessing your physical

conditioning. But it would seem that you don't just intend to sit back and passively attempt to survive."

"Yeah," Harry admitted, "I'd like to do everything I can to ensure that I survive. A couple of weeks ago, a lap of the lake would tire me out. Now I think I can get about five or six kilometers in before it starts to hurt."

"I would suggest aiming for about ten kilometers, as that will give you the endurance necessary for an extended duel or whatever other tasks that the tournament may involve," said Griphook, "Have you been using the muggle gym?"

Harry nodded, "Not much... it's just that I'm trying to build some familiarity with the machines and I don't want to kill myself learning how to use them."

Griphook cocked his head, "I neglected to consider that Harry," admitted the Goblin, "Shall I arrange for a fitness instructor?" busy draining his water bottle, Harry just shook his head, "Well then, as the muggle French would say," said Griphook conversationally, "En Garde!"

A lifetime of dodging objects hurled by Dudley and Vernon augmented by three years of Quidditch had given the young man exceptional reflexes. Even so, he was barely able to dodge the first spread of curses that slammed in to the wall sending stone shards flying. The second spread gouged long furrows in to the floor and Harry finally retaliated with several minor curses and hexes of his own, which the Goblin deflected and then attempted to side step, right in to the path of banished rock. Stumbled for a moment, the teenager regained his footing and went on the offensive immediately, firing a hex or curse every few seconds. Griphook countered, deflected or simply sidestepped with ease.

A second string of spells flashed towards the Goblin, and if it had surprised him, it did not show as he deflected several of the curses, and shielded himself against a few more. Hermione had entered the fray. Worn out from her morning workout with Harry, and knew she could do little but distract in her condition and was barely able to dodge the return volley. A stunner struck her in the shoulder, flipping her over and out of the fight as her wand rolled from her fingers. That exchange has lasted less than five seconds.

The Goblin turned, shield raised only to find himself on the receiving end of a vicious left-handed punch to the nose. A magical shield only stops magic after all. The blow caused no lasting damage, and did not even hurt that much. However, the fact that Harry had actually landed a blow was encouraging news. He was also quick to react, opened up a ten-foot gap between them, firing spells constantly as he extended the distance.

Harry kept up the pressure, so long as he kept the Goblin on the defensive, eventually, something would break his... "What the..." Harry spun on the spot, in time for a leg locker curse to strike, doubling him over before a full body bind slammed him to the floor.

A moment later the goblin had applied the counter curses and helped the young man to his feet, before doing the same for Hermione. "Not bad," the Goblin nodded, "Admittedly, I was holding back, but you did well. You adapted, and improvised well, but you were easily distracted by my apparition," The Goblin pulled several phials and handed them over, reading the labels, they downed the headache remover and bruise reducer. Hermione requested a rematch, and Griphook felt that he would be delighted. Harry merely glowered at the goblin who returned the look with a hunter's grin, "Care to try again Harry?"

Griphook was secretly pleased that the boy could draw upon his rage and anger. It was an open secret that Goblin's could channel those emotions in battle, but what was not so well known was how. That would come later, for now, Harry was itching for a rematch...

Two hours later Harry was aching, and covered in bruises, minor cuts and scratches and had a headache that made his eyeballs pound. Griphook on the other hand was barely out of breath, "I can hear you wondering, not so much as to why you could not defeat me, but as to why you could not even hit me with a single spell."

"It's ridiculous!" gasped Harry, "You're just too fast!" the boy stood and wiped the sweat from his brow.

"Partly," said Griphook, "But the bigger problem is that your repertoire of spells is limited," the Goblin shook his head, "I had hoped that you were exaggerating the poor caliber of your instructors in Defense. However you demonstrate an adequate

grasp of most charms, and how they can be used offensively and defensively as well." The following hour was perhaps one of the most instructive in Harry's life, and he paid a great deal of attention. After another two mock duels, in which Griphook simply wiped the floor with Harry, they called it a morning.

The afternoon would be devoted to adding spells to Harry's arsenal, and Griphook mentioned that Hermione had been doing some research in that direction, "Have her join us Harry. I am curious to see what she has found." Harry glanced at his watch and had to ask Griphook about the time, "I think my watch is a little bit off... it says just after ten in the morning."

"You have the correct time Harry. The dueling area is charmed, with some very powerful chronological magic. You are familiar with the concept are you not? You and Ms. Granger shared an adventure, of sorts."

It took only a moment, "Time turner."

"Similar, except that instead of allowing one to move back and forth through time, this merely slows time. Within the confines of the dueling arena and its attendant spaces, time slows to half its normal rate. In essence, you may have three weeks before the first task, but in here, you have much longer than that. The enchantment cannot be extended to cover extensively large areas, hence its limitation to the dueling and training area," said Griphook, "But one can do more than duel in such as space...."

"Your office!" said Harry suddenly, "It has a similar enchantment doesn't it?" The goblin only smiled, said good-bye and departed by the residence by Floo.

Though he acted in his clients best interests, Griphook knew that one day he would have to tell Harry the truth. However, he was not sure that he wanted or could do that to him. Not yet. Though a few of the signs were already manifesting, these were, nonetheless, just a few of the signs. He had withheld the details of the prophecy and believed he had done the correct thing. Though the High Council felt the boy should know his destiny, there was no reason to ruin the young man's life, a life where he may still get to live and enjoy a great deal more of it. He sat at his desk, and idly tapped the quill against his tooth, wondering how to frame this latest report.

In his office, Albus Dumbledore sucked on a lemon drop, and made a note that he was going to have to start ordering a lot more of them. His conversation with Ms. Granger had been productive indeed. Moreover, he felt no real guilt for what he had done. It was necessary. He told himself, to ensure that the boy stayed under control. Having her under his spell or rather, spells would help with that. However, there was little that he could do to mitigate the Goblin's influence. He had suspected for several long years that Goblins knew everything he knew, and perhaps even more but had simply refused to share.

The headmaster had nearly had a heart attack when Lupin and then the animagus godfather had joined the retinue. Two of his own Professors were also tutoring the boy in Charms and Transfiguration. Nevertheless, with only three weeks, Dumbledore was quite certain that Harry would bow out of the tournament during the first task – with a little outside help – and possibly a spectacular failure. Perhaps he could arrange one to help bring the boy back under his control. He sat at his desk and decided it was time to put several other pieces in to play.

That afternoon, Harry and Hermione went over a variety of spells, curses and jinxes and Hermione was suddenly planning to spend a lot of time with Harry in the dueling arena, partly to help, but also to take advantage of the extra time, some of which was going to involve extracurricular activities not on any syllabus. It became somewhat difficult for Harry to keep track of the time as he spent long hours in the dueling arena, with his various tutors and instructors. True enough, he worked hard with them, and even harder on his own. Hermione was worried that Harry would not only outstrip her in three subjects, but would also rank amongst the top students in the class. Harry Potter outscoring Hermione Granger on the OWLs... the remote possibility of such a thing sent a shiver down her spine. Hermione was however determined to do the right thing, and guide Harry as best she could. Not that it was an easy task. Bluntly put, whenever she mentioned the name "Dumbledore" or "headmaster" Harry would go slightly cold, and if she pushed it, however gently, he would go frigid and distant.

By the end of his first week, Harry had mastered a number of new spells, both offensive and defensive in nature and had found a suitable dueling style that let him play to his strengths. At Luna'

gentle prodding, he began a cursory study in Ancient Runes and found that there was a certain, delight in the way he was forced to use his brain to crack the puzzles, whether it was about enchantment, translation or some other exercise. Griphook was delighted with his progress, as was Professor McGonagall who was surprised at the grasp that Harry had on both inanimate to animate and animate to inanimate transfiguration. His skill put him easily in the top three of the year.

Things had fallen in to a routine, and a good one for that first week and during the second, he followed Griphook's advice and arranged to meet his Charms Professor and retired Master Duelist. It was a day of surprise as Professor Flitwick bowed to Griphook in the Goblin fashion, "Griphook Thazdom of the Bha-zhak Kha-dorath, it has been a long time."

Harry stood with his mouth agape as the two bowed to one another and then hugged, "Professor, you know Griphook?" asked Harry somewhat confused.

"Yes Harry. I do," squeaked the diminutive charms professor, "You could say that we are distantly related by blood, I would be his grand nephew." That left the young wizard speechless as the two spent a minute catching up on old times and various family relations before moving to the subject of the day. "Now Harry, I know you've got a good grasp of Charms, but what I propose to teach you is not just charms, but to pass on certain knowledge that I hope will be of use to you in the coming tournament, and beyond that – what with the way trouble tends to follow you around."

Harry had the good grace to look slightly ashamed as the two shared a smile and grin, "Alright, alright. Can I please get to the learning part of the lesson? You can both tease me during a tea break or something." They set to work, Flitwick explaining one of the secrets that helped him earn his title as master duelist: Spell Chains.

"The ability to cast a variety of spells accurately at a stationary or moving target is important, but there will be occasions, when it is necessary to simply flood an area, or your opponents with spells. Often times, this ability is used to overwhelm shields or even fixed wards and other enchantments. It can also be used to test and gauge defenses. To chain spells, effectively, one must combine the end wand motion of one spell, with the start motion of another. The

greater the similarity between the wand movements, the faster one can cast. The ability to cast spells silently will also be a great asset...."

"Silent casting?" interrupted Harry, "as it casting a spell without saying the incantation?"

"Yes." Professor Flitwick never minded interruptions related to the topic at hand, "Silent casting is exactly what it sounds like, and what you describe. It is unfortunately, a skill not taught at Hogwarts. Those who require it master it during basic Auror, Hit Wizard or Oblivator training. Beyond careers in Magical Law enforcement, there is limited need for the ability." Harry found that it was definitely something he wanted to learn.

Flitwick demonstrated a short but brutally crippling spell chain, in slow motion, exaggerating the wand motions against one of the training dummies. The chains could be as short as two or three spells or include up to a dozen different spells and are equally suited to both attack and defense. While that helped explain the speed of their casting, it did not explain why Goblins, and many of their blood kin could move so fast, "Long ago, before the current Age of Man, Goblin's were masters in the study and application of Time Magic," explained Griphook. "Though you may never cast spells or move at the same speed as a Goblin, that advantage can be negated through application of certain charms or even magical artifacts."

"The goblins had studied the nature of time but after several near catastrophes involving various pasts, presents and futures, they ceased their studies. However, their prolonged exposure to such magic and time travel to study the past and learn from the future had caused the magic itself to permeate the blood of the Goblins and that of their kin," concluded professor Flitwick.

"So there are Goblin Seers?" asked Harry, thinking of divination.

"Yes," Griphook hesitated, "There are... but like their wizarding counterparts, they are few that can properly remember their visions or prophecies. Those that can see and recall their visions must then learn to interpret them. Many Goblins seers only understand their prophecies until the events themselves have begun or come to pass," he shrugged, "In many cases, their visions and what they foretell are dismissed as de ja vu and nothing more."

Flitwick picked up the explanation, "The Ministry slaves those with the All Seeing Eye to a pensieve," he pauses at the questioning expression on Harry's face and remembers that the wizard grew up as a muggle, "A pensieve is a magical artifact that can store memories, so that any prophecies they make are automatically recorded. But the process is damaging to the mind, and what damage is done is irreversible and many lose years of their lives." He was more than a little disgusted with the practice.

"So goblins have their own seers, and prophecies," mused Harry, unaware of just how uncomfortable that line of questioning was making Griphook.

"Yes. However, where our seers are many, we have few of what we call Farseer. These are the few whose recorded prophecies and come to pass. Such an event brings great honor to the clan concerned but rarely within the lifetime of the seer themselves," concluded Griphook, "Now then, back to the lesson at hand..."

That Friday morning, Albus Dumbledore watched the French half Veela with a twinkle in his eye as he moved his Queen to checkmate his King.

Fleur sat at the Hufflepuff table this morning, much to the suspicion of its usual occupants and, while she ideally wanted Harry alone, this looked like the best opportunity she was going to get: Potter and the Longbottom boy. The others in that circle of friends had already left. Smoothing down her skirt, made somewhat shorter and snugger fitting than usual, she loosened a few buttons on her blouse and followed her, prey. "Mr. Potter?"

Harry could tell that something was happening, to him, as he swayed around almost drunkenly, standing before the Beauxbatons Champion. There was something, very, very wrong, but a part of his mind, really did not care. Even though another part of his mind, really did mind, "Miss ...ah... Dela, Delacour?"

Bringing her Veela traits to the fore, she struck just the right pose to display all of her assets; her voice dripping with sexual promise as she purred, "Call me Fleur. I have been looking for the appropriate opportunity to apologize for my outburst after Halloween. It was a difficult night for all us." She batted her eyelids and Neville, dropped

to his knees love struck and spell bound. "I do hope you can forgive me,' she lightly grasped his arm and let her hand trail down, her well manicured, deep red nails raking his skin ever so lightly.

It was the sight of Neville... it reminded Harry of the Imperius Curse. That thought broke the hold over him, even as her honey-coated voice promised him all kinds of things, things that he had not even touched on with Hermione yet.

Just thinking of her fueled his resistance and his struggle to break her hold intensified. Veela charm does not dominate a person physically in the manner of the Imperius curse. He realized it did something to the mind. His mind split, half of him wanting to give her everything she wanted, another part of him fighting desperately to resist. Fleur could not understand how Harry did not have his hands all over her. She gently pressed ahead, pushing herself as close to him as she could whispering seductively in to his ear, "I'm hoping that we can become very, very good relationship, with a mutually beneficial arrangement." It was the way she emphasized the last word. He almost snapped when he heard it.

Hermione had doubled back to the Great Hall for a book she had forgotten and was a shocked, mute witness to the entire scene: The French Champion cooing in Harry's ear had Neville on his knees as Sir Cadogan screaming a battle cry as he sought to break through the frame of the nearest portrait. Every her hidden insecurities rushed to the surface and in to overdrive. How could Harry possibly want anything to do with a, a muggle born bookworm when he could have something like that...that... and he was staring at her, the whole time!

It was all he could do to croak out one word, loud enough for her to hear, "Veela..." Fleur blinked in confusion and turned to find out whom he could possibly.... A ten and three quarter inch long, vine wood wand with a dragon heartstring core had its tip resting delicately against the base of Fleur's neck. Being part Veela was a blessing sometimes, but more often than not, it was a curse. "Depulso!"

The banishing charm sent the Veela skidding back on her heels. The suddenness of Hermione's intervention left Fleur without even a second's notice before she collided face first against the wall. With both hands behind his head, she pulled him close and kissed him,

as she had never done before, "My girl is all witch, and that's all she'll ever need to be," said Harry with a satisfied smile.

"How was it possible for you to resist her Harry? I mean, she's a Veela... well one half or quarter Veela, and she had Neville practically gibbering on the floor!" asked Hermione.

Harry shook his head, "I'm not sure I could have held her off for much longer," he pulled Hermione close, "Thank Professor Moody. It was like fighting off the Imperius. Her... ability doesn't make you or force you to do anything. It makes you want to do whatever she wants...It's the most powerful befuddlement and compulsion charm." he explained.

The second week had otherwise passed without incident or mishap, and Harry's dueling abilities and skill with magic were improving in fits and starts as Professor Flitwick showed him how to combine spells chains with active and passing dodging tactics. Griphook had taught him two dozen odd hand to hand combat moves that included punching, kicking and grappling with an enemy in addition to focusing more on Harry's overall physical fitness and training regime.

Professor McGonagall had been an interesting opponent who had turned the environment to her advantage, transfiguring and animating anything and everything and commanding in to attack. Though Harry had obliterated many of her attackers, the charging furniture lead by a sofa, bookcase and armchair had finally imprisoned him in a corner of the dueling arena. Hermione had suggested Professor Moody by Harry had declined. For one, the Auror, however famous was too close or even an ally of Dumbledore. Beside, something just did not feel quite right about him.

Harry had stonewalled the headmaster and even Hermione had made little progress in helping to rebuild that bridge. When Dumbledore had actually offered access to his personal library however, he had relented, only to appease his girlfriend. The library was impressive, but he recognized many of the volumes contained within. He quickly concluded that the headmaster was holding back. The majority of these titles he could purchase in any slightly ill reputable bookshop in Diagon Alley or any "establishment" in Knockturn Alley.

In the end, he left the headmasters office with a few books under his arm, to keep up appearances. The headmaster collapsed in to his seat and contemplated the information he had retrieved. The boy's training was progressing almost too well, and Potter had access to his family vault and the blood protections were functional once again. The vault and its contents were now beyond his grasp.

He was running out of time and chess pieces. With the first task only a week away, the headmaster resolved to set in motion his last available pawns. He could only hope they would help him get Harry back under control.

Chapter 7

Separation Anxiety

Sunday, a week before the First Task, saw Ron's return to Hogwarts. It was a quiet, subdued return. Nobody was there to welcome him back or greet him, which was just the way he wanted it. Ron swallowed his pride, and knew that he had only one choice: Apologize to Harry, for not believing him.

The following morning dawned bright and sunny though a little chilly. Harry had kept his regular pace, lapped Hermione once but she was doing fine, and she was catching up with him. Already, she was not quite out of breath at the end of them. She had agreed to join him for a multitude of reasons, but mainly because as his girlfriend, there would be some kind of insanity they would need to overcome - or run from.

They were out of sight of the castle, and safe enough on the grounds of the castle, as Hermione pushed herself through her final lap as Harry finished his tenth and final lap. Taking a slow walk back to the castle, the couple saw the light on in Hagrid's hut with smoke dancing from the chimney and stopped in. The half-giant was slightly worried about what Harry would face in the coming task, and he had no clue as the organizers had been keeping everything under wraps. Hagrid had confirmed however, that cheating was an integral part of tournament tradition - so long as nobody was hurt. Taking in to account that people had died, it occurred to Harry to wonder just how many of those deaths were truly "accidental."

Walking back up the castle, the couple caught sight of Ron Weasley, leaning against the open door of the castle, "Harry, Hermione." He greeted them with almost complete indifference. They stared at each other for a long, moment, "So how goes it, champion?" drawled Ron. It was a stark difference in his attitude: Polite to the point of sarcastically insulting. Harry had seen that particular attitude before. So had Hermione, "Not sure what you hope to achieve by that..." he nodded in the direction of the Black Lake, "running around it like a mud...muggle."

Harry could note the changes in his almost former friend and it all seemed strangely familiar: The air, the attitude, the way he carried himself, but he decided to answer the question, in the hopes of

rebuilding a friendship that he truly cherished, "Physical training, just trying to get in to better shape for the tournament." He said, keeping his tone carefully neutral, "Why?"

Ron righted himself, "Just wondering," and the young red head was wondering, just who had the right of things, considering everything he had been told and discussed with Draco, Pansy, even Millicent and Daphne. While the four were pureblood and the purist ideology they followed extreme to Ron, he had to admit that there were points that he did agree with. Considering how far his pureblood family had fallen, out of favor, from wealth, from power. It had given Ron a lot to think about but he was not sure if he was prepared to turn his back on three years of friendship, "Harry... things are never going to be the same between us are they?" asked the redhead. There was a touch of hope in his voice, and Harry was willing to concede the point with a careful nod, "But can they be better? Better than they are now."

Hermione stole a glance at both boys and whispered, "You and him need to work this out, without me getting in the way." She hesitated for a moment, "Trade a few punches if you have to, and if you do hex him, try not to put him in the hospital for more than a day." She nodded coolly to Ron, who had almost completely ignored her existence.

Harry never once took his eyes off Ron as he drew his wand and cast a silencing charm over the pair of them and their small patch of the foyer. Not for nothing however, had Harry been practicing his silent casting, added another privacy charm over himself and met Ron's eyes, "Harry," he said very seriously, "I should have believed you when you told me you didn't enter your name in the goblet."

Harry's eyes bore in to Ron as if he no longer needed to blink, "Fair enough. Apology accepted." Ron looked very relieved but Harry was not finished, "Now all you have to do is explain why you fired multiple curses at your best friends." Ron was speechless and just stood there with his mouth fish out of water, "You doubted me, when you've seen the inside of my vault. Why would I risk my life for money? Don't you think that I have enough of fame? Have had enough of people gawking at me over this damn scar? I can forgive you for not believing me. But I can't forgive you for trying to hex me," his voice developed an icy chill, "I can't forgive you for trying to hex

my Hermione." He growled, "Figure it out. Ron. Figure out why. Then you can apologize to me, and to 'Mione."

This was not going anyway like Ron had hoped it would, and he hated that, hated the fact that Draco had been right, that an apology was not going to cut it, "You don't see it do you?" said Ron carefully, "You don't understand do you?"

"What, do you think I don't understand?" said Harry. Ron remained silent, "You think I don't see the jealousy, hatred, envy, disgust that surrounds me because I was born and some lunatic madman died trying to kill me?" Harry laughed, "Voldemort choose me," he said fiercely, his voice devoid of laughter, "My parents paid the price! You know the hell I endure called Number 4 Privet Drive! When you figure things out, come find us. Until then..." He had stalked in to the castle, feeling Ron's gaze upon the back of his head.

"Do you think he'll figure it out?" asked Hermione at breakfast later that morning.

Harry chewed his bacon thoughtfully, buying time to gather his thoughts on what was a sensitive subject. "If he can't, he can't. We're not going to tip toe around him." He shrugged, "I know that things have move fast between us, but everyone else has kept up with us," she gave him a look, "Fine. Everyone has sorta kinda kept up. But he hasn't even tried to do that." He shrugged again, "Things just can't go back to the way they were."

She smiled, "I don't think I could handle it if things went back the way they were."

He nodded in agreement, "Yeah well... there this bodiless spirit of a lunatic mad man on the loose that's been trying to kill me my whole life. I don't intend to make it easy for him, even if Dumbledore seems hell bent on doing just that."

At the mention of the headmaster, Hermione quieted for a moment, at war with herself before something won out and she forged ahead, "He's only trying to do the right thing Harry," she said, "He cares about you a lot," she rushed on before he could interrupt, "He cares and he's made a lot of mistakes. But I think, you...we've been hard on him." said Hermione quietly, "Perhaps too hard, I don't think that

we've even given him the chance to try to make amends for what he's done."

Harry was not forgiving, "He knows just about everything that goes on in this castle, and then the rest of the wizarding world. He could have intervened at any point in my life. Instead I had to grow up with 11 years of hell at the Durselys," he was speaking, quietly, calmly and fortunately, the very slight tremble that ran down the length of the Gryffindor table went unnoticed, "I can't forgive what he's done, yet. Maybe, somewhere in the future, I can try. I still have to go back there for the summer you know?" he was quiet, almost whispering, "And three months away from you... I'm trying not to think about it."

Harry had made it a point to come up to the Castle for breakfast at least three times a week, even though he was never absent for lunch or dinner. There were mornings when he preferred a quiet breakfast with some if not all of his retinue that had grown to include the Prank Master Generals Gred and Forge and "Prank Master Trainee" Ginny and perhaps most surprisingly of all Neville Longbottom.

As everyone left for class, Harry and Neville were alone at the Gryffindor table. The two boys were not actually talking, just really enjoying the silent company. Harry knew that Neville and Ginny were growing close, but he was not about to embarrass his friend on the topic but felt that he had a certain responsibility to, or perhaps for Ginny, "Neville, you and Ginny, it's getting serious?" The shy quiet boy blushed, and Harry hurried on, "I'm not trying to put you on the spot here, but you should know that things are probably going to get difficult with Ron."

"You and him, still at odds?" asked Neville quietly. Harry nodded, "I didn't think he'd turn on you the way he did. Considering how much you two have been through together...." Harry was not sure how to respond to that insightful remark as they parted ways for their respective classes. Harry had two Marauders waiting for him.

Though the guards were in their customary places, something seemed off to him as he strode in to the residence. He dropped in to a crouch and rolled to the left. A flick of his wrist had his wand in his hand and a moment after that he had rolled out from behind the curse-shattered couch and showered the area in paper confetti revealing his attackers taking the offensive.

Dodging in random directions, the teenager attacked, "impedimenta!" followed a tripping jinx, followed by leg locker and then, "Petrificus totalus!" and then, "Stupfey!" finally "Expelliarmus!" the spell chain was one of his own creations and felt that it would have done Flitwick proud as his first opponent went down for the count. The wand flew from his attacker's hand and he summoned it to him only to have it fly over his shoulder. A spell slammed in to his ribs, taking him off his feet. Slamming in to the floor, he somehow kept a grip of his wand. Stunned for a moment, he managed to dodge a spell, then a second before disillusioning himself and rolling back to his feet compliments of his hand-to-hand combat instruction.

His remaining opponent had mirrored his charm. The disillusionment charm makes one invisible by adapting one's appearance to their surroundings... if that was the charm employed against him. Confetti streaming from his wand but that would not reveal anyone who stood still, "Periculum!" standing still while covered in paper is easy enough, but standing still under flaming paper is much harder. "Rictumsempra! Stupefy! Expelliarmus!" Harry ducked as two of his spells rebounded off a shield, and spun low to the right "Depulso!" the banishment charm was a cover for a far more powerful spell, "Reducto!" that blasted a cabinet and showered his Goblin attacker in wood splinters.

Suddenly, Harry was airborne as the rug flew out from under his feet, courtesy of a summoning charm. He found himself staring up at a grinning Goblin, a stunner already dancing on his fingertips with Remus "Moony" Lupin looking on. They apologized for the ambush, but they had wanted see how he was progressing, "and nothing," explained Lupin, "works better than a little impromptu quiz."

'Yeah well, next time please leave the test, a note, a quill and some parchment okay?" said Harry, with the barest trace of a smile. They got down to business, and if the duel was not demonstration enough, it was clear that Harry was not only ahead in his class, but ahead of his year as well in Defense, Charms and Transfiguration. He struggled with potions but knew that would be the case as long as Snape continued to "teach" the subject. Herbology was about average and he was quite happy with where he stood academically. He was still attending a few of his regularly scheduled classes - namely potions, herbology and the ultimate bore: Divination because his tutors and instructors were not masters in those particular areas

of study. Not that he minded much. He was so far ahead in the other subjects, having to work in class was a novelty.

In his office, Dumbledore was pacing back and forth, and sucking on yet another lemon drop, his fifth in the past hour. They helped calm him down, and help him think as well. Something he clearly needed to do a great deal. So far, his plans to get back in to Harry's good graces had all gone awry, and even attempts to manipulate the boy were not faring well. Even though she was doing the best she could, he was still too sensitive a topic. Everything she mentioned his name, Harry would turn cold, like the Tom Riddle he remembered from his days as Hogwarts's Transfiguration Professor. To make matters worse, the boy was able to resist the charms of a Veela! A feat in its own right, but it was clear that Fleur was no longer a viable way to get the boy back. No. He needed something else.

Fawkes shook his magnificent head, Dumbledore, his friend for almost fifty years was wandering down a path that he, ironically feared Harry might one-day walk, and there was nothing he could do. Phoenix's are immortal, and Fawkes had seen more than one wizard make the same mistakes that Albus was making now. Again, he could do nothing but continue to carry out his duty: Watch, observe and record the passing of the ages, and never interfere. As an agent of a higher power, Fawkes knew that soon, his Mistress would have to act.

The Phoenix burst in to flames with a trill and vanished from his perch. Dumbledore ignored the event. Fawkes had been doing that regularly for almost three years and he thought nothing of it.

If only the headmaster knew...

Chapter 8:

Nothing sells like Harry Potter

For Luna and Xenophilius Lovegood, the most recent publication of the Quibbler created a public outrage and condemnation for Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge and by extension, his entire administration. Harry could only whistle in appreciation. The headline itself would assure the need for at least a triple print run. Nothing after all, sold quite as well as a Harry Potter story, and the Quibbler was the only place to get one:

Harry Potter and Sirius Black: His Innocently Condemned Godfather.

Sirius Black spent twelve years in Azkaban and escaped less than a year ago from the dreaded Azkaban prison. Most wanted mass murderers would return to their life of crime or flee. Mr. Black has done neither. He opted to stay in the country to protect his Godson, Harry Potter. Then, why does anyone spend twelve years in Azkaban Prison, when never charged with a crime? More importantly, why does anyone spend twelve years in Azakaban without trial? Unlike other publications, the Quibbler double-checks its facts: The fact is that the public record contains nothing on the arrest, trial or incarceration of Mr. Black.

On the topic of his Godfather's wrongful imprisonment, Mr. Potter had this to say: "The real culprit, the real traitor was a supposed friend of my father and unregistered animagus: Peter Pettigrew who has the form of a rat - how utterly fitting"

After a protracted battle in Hogsmeade Village's infamous Shrieking Shack last year, Mr. Potter actually had Peter Pettigrew in custody. However, the criminal escaped when Mr. Potter and his companions were attacked by the Ministry's own army of Dementors that were at Hogwarts School to protect the students from Mr. Black. It also happens that the minister has ordered a man who never stood trial sentenced to the Dementor's Kiss upon capture.

On the subject of Dementors, Mr. Potter had this to say, "I was attacked (by Dementors) on the Hogwarts Express, during a Quidditch match and once again on the school grounds. Three separate times in one year! Most people go their entire lives without even seeing one!"

Mr. Potter went on to question just how the Dementors were there for the safety of him and his fellow students, and also to question why the announcement by him and fellow student Hermione Granger to Mr. Black's innocence were brushed aside as the ravings of two confounded teenagers.

When asked if he had any last words, he had four words: "One. Hundred. Thousand. Galleons. Payable upon my 17th Birthday to who or the organization that brings me Peter Pettigrew. Alive... but dead will suffice." The Goblins of Gringotts have confirmed that Mr. Potter's has the funds to pay out this reward. We at the Quibbler wish to remind the public that an animagus will revert to their human form upon death.

Victor Krum had actually been in the shower when the owl delivered the Quibbler and Daily Prophet together. It was a part of his Headmaster Karkaroff's training program to ensure that Victor was fully aware of what events were unfolding around them, for anything could contain an advantage. Victor was still wearing his towel as he reread the Quibbler article for the third time and it forced him to accept that his primary competitor was not Fleur or Cedric, but the long shot, fourteen-year-old underdog. Additional articles highlighted the boy...young man's encounters with Dementors and his corporeal stag patronus – something Victor himself still found difficult. It made for interesting and tactical reading. It was clear to Victor that Harry would use everything from weapon to trick to money to get what was right.

Cedric seated for breakfast found himself wondering whether Harry really had told him the truth about the Goblet of Fire. If Harry could bring one hundred thousand galleons for a reward, why would he waste his time for a thousand? The deal with the Quibbler could have been made without participating in the tournament too. Harry had told him the truth, concluded the Hufflepuff, and he was glad that none in his house had gone against the 14 year old wizard.

Fleur read the article and cursed quietly under her breath: Rich, powerful, and able to resist Veela Charm. He was everything any woman could want. He was everything she and the Veela in her wanted because there was simply no one else better for a thousand miles. Standing, she took her leave of the Ravenclaw table and had

barely set her foot out the door of the hall when she was half tossed, half dragged down a side passage.

Just as suddenly, she found herself standing face to drawn wands. A quick glance over her shoulder revealed another trio. Six witches lead by Ginerva Molly Weasley looked ready to hex first and explain later as she snapped out an explanation, "When any wizard chooses a Gryffindor girl, her housemates respect and protect that relationship. Harry made his choice, and to protect her, it means that he is off limits."

Being part Veela, meant that you had the boys drooling over you from the moment those traits manifest themselves until control of those traits is gained. She had encountered such reactions, both deliberate and unprovoked. Fleur was not only a Witch from Beauxbaton, the finest school of magic in Western Europe but a Triwizard Champion! "But you forget, that I am not a student of Hogwarts School," she said carefully, moving her hand to her wand.

"No Miss Delacour, you forget, and forget a great deal: You forget that you stand in Hogwarts. You forget that you have attempted to interfere in the relationship of two of our own. You forget that you stand, with six wands trained, and you forget that we would be quite happy to use them!" That was an open invitation to a duel, and Fleur Delacour would be more than happy to demonstrate to these "children" that those of French magical blood are not spineless like their muggle counterparts!

Fleur's wand was already half raised, two incantations were nearly complete when a voice rang out, cold shrill and sharp, "Stop!" Hermione Granger stood with her wand drawn, Harry had taken up a flanking position in case negotiation failed and spells became necessary, "This ends now!" she commanded, "This is something that I need to handle." She turned her gaze on Ginny, "Leave."

The six witches hesitated until Ginny nodded and they lowered their wands. As they filed past, Hermione gave the redhead a warm hug, "Please, understand, I appreciate the gesture, but I can handle my own relationships" The redhead nodded and moved off. Fleur was not exactly sure what to make of the situation, and was even more confused when Hermione apologized for the action of her friends, "Loyalty is an admirable trait," she shook her head, "But my friends were out of line." She turned to face the Veela, eye to eye, "You've

already... met my boyfriend and Gringotts Champion," Fleur noted a small amount of pride in that statement, "and while you are in competition with him, I would prefer to count you amongst my friends. Not my enemies."

"I have too many enemies as it is," said Harry with a slight macabre smile. Where wizard or wand magic requires a wand, there are many forms of natural magic, innate to those of magical descent. There was no need for any spell or magic to confirm what her eyes and experience had taught her. Harry would resist her charm to the end, and his girlfriend who would defend him to the death.

On the subject of mates, it was an all or nothing deal: Veela never settle for second place. She still had the urge to try, to distract and somehow steal the not quite a boy, but not quite a man either, standing before her. She was at war with herself for several long moments against her Veela instincts, and she felt something shift within her, something that did not feel quite right, but that she could not place, as if something lifted from her shoulders. Strange, she had encountered potential life mates before, but never felt such a strange sense of lifting when the potential match had failed. With a shake of her head, she accepted the hand of friendship with a smile of her own.

Ginny watched the trio walk in to the great hall and noticed that they were all smiles. They stopped for a word with Cedric before coming to her. Ginny had an apology on the tip of her tongue but Hermione simply pulled the girl in to a hug, "I understand what you were doing and why. I appreciate that," she turned to the rest of the girls, "that all of you were watching out for me. Thank you."

Lavender Brown shrugged, "We're Gryffindor Hermione. We may not always agree, or get a long, but we watch out for our own. It's a pride thing... a lion's pride." Harry gave Ginny the same sort of one-armed hug and the youngest Weasley blushed furiously as she met Harry's emerald gaze from a distance of a few inches when the Prank Master Generals intervened.

"Mr. Potter," started Fred, doing an impressive impersonation of Professor McGonagall, "It's not bad enough that you have enthralled Ms. Granger," he waved an arm over to the Ravenclaw, seated at their table, surrounded by a collection of younger students, asking her advice about something.

George took over and added an imperial overtone, "...but to then add Ms. Lovegood, and then a French Triwizard Champion to your ah...collection," he said drily.

"...and then the young Ms. Weasley," chortled Fred with a Dumbledore twinkle in his eye.

"...one would think you're starting a harem!" the two concluded simultaneously.

There was a tense moment of silence, "It took me a very long time to get in to the Harry Potter Harem. Now if you want a place, I'm sure Harry wouldn't mind..." Luna said dreamily as she eyed the twins with a suggestive smirk that would have put a Veela to shame. One look at the expressions of shock and horror set the entire table laughing

"Well, on the topic of collections," said Harry airily, "I was planning to invite a number of people for dinner. Luna, Hermione, you are of course both invited. Ginny, Neville, Colin, I hope you can join us?" He left the twins to stew for a moment before extending the invitation to the pair, on the condition that they both are on their best prank free behavior.

Everyone was quick to agree that dinner would be an excellent idea. Some would have found it strange that Hermione had not objected to Dobby's presence, but Harry had privately explained that he was a free elf, and worked for pay – five Galleons a month – and also got vacation time – two days off a month. Griphook had fought an uphill battle, climbed a wall and crossed the ceiling to get the stubborn elf to agree to what Griphook referred to as "slavery conditions even by Goblin standards!" With a whistle, Hedwig flapped her way in to the Great Hall and descended upon Harry shoulder, waiting as he wrote out a quick invitation to Victor Krum. Almost as an afterthought, he invited several professors, his tutors and a few outsiders to join them.

Sitting aboard the Durmstrang's vessel, Victor Krum was passing the time, alone. He valued privacy and could quite understand what Harry Potter had to live with. Fame was a fickle ally at best. Even though Quidditch was a team sport, Seekers were simultaneously the most important and most alone. Their catch could make or break a game. In the aftermath of the Quidditch World Cup, he had ben

equally reviled and revered for catching the snitch when he did. The spotlight of fame and international superstardom meant condemnation and praise for almost every action he took. Privacy was something he enjoyed.

Victor was surprised when the beautiful snowy owl had landed next to him and he responded positively to the invitation. He had been wondering what the point of the competition was. Headmaster Karkaroff had hardly encouraged his students to mingle or mix with those of Hogwarts or even Beauxbatons for that matter. This seemed to the Quidditch star to be the perfect opportunity to do what the tournament was supposed to do: meet people from other schools and make a few friends.

When Dumbledore learned of the dinner invitations, he went through several lemon drops, contemplating the potential impacts. He decided to let the matter rest. There was no point in trying to stop students from having dinner together. However, he did arrange a quiet meeting with the boy. Harry was outside the gargoyle at eight o'clock sharp. It sprang aside and he made his way up to Dumbledore's office, knocked and entered, "Good Evening Harry," he said with his charismatic smile and twinkle in his eye, "Are you ready for the first task?"

Harry shrugged, nonchalant, relaxed and confident, "I'm confident in my abilities thanks mostly to my instructors," he took a seat and waved away the offer of tea or any other snacks. One thing he had learned from the Goblins was that you do not accept food or drink from anyone you are or ever were at odds with. The conversation meandered on several polite topics, and Harry recognized this was the headmaster's attempts to rebuild their shaky bridges but Harry was not prepared to spend the evening talking in circles about nothing, "Professor, I must apologize but I do have several different assignments that need my attention this evening. Was there any particular reason that you wanted to meet?"

"Harry," the headmaster hesitated for a moment, feeling every single year of his monumental age, "I did mean what I said, about clearing the air between us ..." Harry's gaze turned almost predatory. "I understand you've expanded your retinue to include three members of the Weasley family and Colin Creevey?" At the brisk, perfunctory nod, the headmaster could only sigh and continue, "I understand that Colin acts as your official photographer, but why the twins and

Ginny? The relationship," he paused to emphasize his point, "friendship cannot be damaged beyond repair by so little? Surely an invitation to dinner with the Champions would help... repair the damage?"

It was a risk to use such information, but then it was also a risk to have retrieved the information using that particular magical talent and the spells he had placed on a young witch some weeks before. Harry simply sat there and wondered where the Headmaster had gotten that information. Though he had made the dinner itself no secret, the guest list - well a part of it - was something he had kept to himself and Hermione.

Ron was not a topic he wanted to discuss, but he remembered Hermione's words to him and decided to try, more for her, "Professor, I can't afford to just throw away three and half... well just three years friendship. However, I do not have much choice. To forgive him means letting slide his insults to me, Hermione and the other victims of his temper tantrum. Moreover, if you recall, he was the one who abandoned me, refused to believe me. Would I like to repair that friendship? I have tried and the next step is one Ron has to make. And if he can't..." Harry shrugged, "Then it's over and done with. I'm tired of trying to please everyone but me."

Nodding to show his understanding of the gravity of the situation and the choice that Harry was making, the headmaster glided the conversation along, "Your retinue stands at seven students, two professors, Mr. Lupin as your private tutor and Griphook. I mean no disrespect to any of your tutors, but can the four of them, especially since three of them are more part time than full time handle the education of seven teenagers, especially when one considers that Fred and George Weasley can be considered to be equivalent to the trouble of seven children?"

"My retinue continues their regular classes, and attends whatever private instruction they feel like taking, learning what interests them. Those that choose to stay in the residence are welcome to stay." He was tired of the games, of the subtle politicking, "The castle is not safe for Luna. Her own house and administrative inaction has seen to that."

The rebuke had all the subtlety of a battle-axe to the side of the head and Dumbledore had the good grace to look embarrassed.

Harry met the headmaster saddened face with a glare, "Harry, you must understand, that..."

"Headmaster," Harry cut him off, "What I have done thus far has been out of respect and of common courtesy to you as headmaster. Consider it a gesture of good faith on my part. Not a voluntary one but it is what it is. I will be honest: My life has not been mine to live. I would not wish my childhood on Draco Malfoy and I despise him. I will not change my mind. And you will not be able to convince me about what is best for my girlfriend or the rest of my retinue."

Dumbledore could see the futility of trying to continue down any avenue, whether to negotiate, plead or even beg. He would get no farther than this: The boy was talking to him again. Acting the part of the injured party, he dismissed Harry.

For the past week the castle had been buzzing about what the first task could possibly entail that would test daring, nerve and cunning. Ron had speculated along with the rest of the students. So far, the theories had gotten wilder and wilder, including Sphinxes, Dementors, Werewolves, and even Vampires much to the amusement of Ron and his new friend Draco Malfoy. Unsurprisingly, he had been spending more and more time in the Slytherin common room – with Daphne Greengrass if rumor was to be believed - and he'd become something of a pariah in Gryffindor.

Ron was more than a little perturbed when Professor McGonagall ordered him to meet the headmaster in his office that night. He knew that despite his actions earlier in the year, he had not put another foot wrong. He had been trying to figure out what Harry had meant during their last conversation with each other, and where his friendship with Draco fit in to the bigger picture. However, for the moment, his biggest concern was the headmaster, "How are you coping Mr. Weasley?" he asked, "I know that things have been, difficult between you and your best friends..."

Ron actually laughed, "I don't have any best friends in Gryffindor, not anymore. They don't even look in my direction when they do decide to eat in the great hall;" he was more than a little bitter, "Both of my brothers and my little sister have sold me out to be with the Champion!" There was a great deal of hatred, but also pain in that one word, and Dumbledore was quick to note it.

"Nonsense!" he replied, "You have best friends. They will both realize that you have been a good friend to them both in the past. Things will be as they should be and, I suspect much sooner than you think.

"Do you really think so?"

"Of course I do!" the headmaster was actually smiling, with that twinkle back in his eye, "Harry and I are on speaking terms once again," he admitted candidly, "But only just. He really could use our help in the first task of the tournament. I just hope that Charlie does not bring any truly vicious breeds. I feel for the Champions, but even more so for Harry..."

The penny unfortunately, refused to drop as Ron brightened, "Charlie's coming? That's great I haven't seen him for ages!" Dumbledore wondered the same thing Ginny had wondered: How Ron could be a chess prodigy but thicker than "Hogwart's A history" about just about everything else.

"I was worried about Mr. Weasley," continued the headmaster gently, "After all, he will be here in his official capacity, from Romania." With anyone else, he would have been worried about laying it on too thick. With Ron however, he was convinced it would be a necessity.

Ron however, was not as dense as he made out to be. It wasn't that he was stupid, but by pretending to be dumber than he really was, he'd managed to make his life that much easier. For three years, he had been able to sponge off both Hermione and Harry for schoolwork with none of them being the wiser for it. He knew exactly what it was Dumbledore was telling him, but he couldn't figure out the reason why. If the two were on speaking terms, why was he getting all the hints? Being a chess prodigy does help with strategy and there in lay the key: They were barely on speaking terms, and discussing the tournament would probably get out of hand, quickly. However, the second youngest Weasley had the measure of the headmaster now, "Official capacity? From the Dragon Reserve?" he was actually smiling, pretending that the knut had dropped, "Oh! Hagrid got dragons for care for magical creatures!"

"Yes." The headmaster met Ron's gaze fully with a smile, "Four dragons," It took almost no effort to enter the defenseless mind and skim the surface thoughts. He was however, careful not to venture

deeper than that, just in case. The headmaster was more than a little surprised to learn what he did, including his new friendship with Draco and Slytherin. The headmaster wore a slightly bemused smile - as if a student could out play him at his own game - "Regardless, I'm sure that things will be back to normal shortly."

Ron left the office of the headmaster wondering just what had happened. He thought he had felt something, but could not quite place it, and resolved to talk to Draco about it. Perhaps the Slytherin could shed some light on the matter.

Though Draco was not quite sure what to make of Ron's description of something "poking around in my head," on what to do with his knowledge of the dragons, Draco was blunt:

"Better Cedric than Potter," he said with disgust. Ron shrugged, giving neither support nor condemnation of Draco's position on the matter, "Ron," Draco hesitated, "I know that you still harbor feelings of well, friendship for Potter and even the mud...muggle Granger. However, you have to remember what you are. You. Are. A. Pure. Blood. The blond boy hesitated, "You will have to choose, and soon."

It was Thursday, three days before the first task when Hagrid managed to get a hold of Harry as he left the camp with Hermione for their morning run around the lake, "Harry! Hermione!" he shouted and waved to them. The gamekeeper looked around, "There's something I need to tell..."

Harry just sighed. Last night had ended well, with a nice dinner, and some very enjoyable time alone with Hermione. There was no telling just exactly what she had been reading in addition to her school books, but Harry had made a series of interesting discoveries about what she'd read and had thoroughly enjoyed the "brief preview of things to come." The good mood had only improved when he gotten up to find his Hermione curled up asleep, with most of her clothes on. "I'm guessing Dumbledore sent you with some information?"

"No. No." he reassured them. The two teens chuckled, knowing that Hagrid was the worst liar and perhaps worst secret keeper in the magical world. He was telling the truth, "Listen, I found out what they got for the first task. They've been hidden in the Forbidden..."

"Hagrid," Harry cut off Hagrid quickly, "Please understand that I do appreciate you wanting to help," he held up a hand to forestall the protest, "But where you sent in the Forbidden Forest on an errand?" That stopped the half giant in his tracks, "Every year, I've gotten mixed up in something or other. Dumbledore has failed to keep his students from getting involved, but also made sure that there are enough clues for us to get his job done. I can't trust him." They both saw the look of hurt in his eyes, "I can't trust him, Hagrid. But I trust you, my friend." Harry broke in to a smile, "Trust me, I can handle this."

Hagrid's hugs made Molly Weasley's seem like she was shaking hands instead, "And then, there's the money Harry. I heard why, but I don't understand. The Basilisk never attacked me!"

"You were," said Hermione, "Just not directly. It cost you your wand and rights as a wizard." It was true that while Hagrid had been a mediocre student at best, he would have still received a full magical education and earned a number of OWLs and NEWTs. "It's a small thing, money... You deserve an apology that you never got." The teens said nothing to each other but they had developed something of a language of looks and expressions that only the two of them understood. They cut their morning workout to spend time with a friend.

Friday night saw a very frustrated headmaster much to the amusement of Fawkes, who just watched him wear a hole in the stone floor as he paced by and forth like a clockwork soldier. Weasley had ultimately said nothing to Harry. Hagrid had not appreciated the position he had been put in to "help" Harry needed to be brought back under his control, his influence and direct indirect control.

In the Great Hall, Fawkes appeared amongst the rafters in a burst of flame. In this corner of the enchanted roof, there was, by comparison, a very small portrait of a woman. The Phoenix dipped its head, in the equivalent of a bow until she spoke, "Rise. You should know better, than to bow to me, old friend." She chided him gently, as her hand reached out of the painting to stroke the magnificent head, the phoenix thrilled softly at her touch. "Fawkes, where does the Light stand?" He sang a few notes, and those musical notes contained far more information that any human could ever decipher, comprehend and understand. What Fawkes said

caused the Lady to shake her head in dismay, "Then all is as we feared, and the Light stands idle and ignorant as darkness creeps ever closer."

That evening, Peter was staring at himself looking back at him from the front page of the Quibbler. He was now in a particularly precarious position: Most Death Eaters would sell their own families for a lot less than one hundred thousand galleons. Now that it was public knowledge that he was animagus, he had no choice, even if he did not want to. To stay alive, and relatively safe, he would have to stay close to Lord Voldemort, even if he would rather spend another thirteen years as a rat.

Chapter 9

The First Task

They were in the stands when Hermione walked up the stairs and plunked herself at the end of the row. She noticed that the four judges were in a stand of their own, located on the edge of a quarry gouged in to the Quidditch pitch. She could recognize the four judges and the guest of honor on behalf of the Ministry. Madame Maxine was unmistakable, as was Dumbledore sitting beside her. Durmstrang headmaster Igor Karkaroff seated on the far end, as far from the others as possible.

In London two nights before, a magically weak but politically powerful wizard paced in the British Minister of Magic office. Cornelius Fudge was quickly reaching the end of his rope. The tournament had originally been an excellent idea and an opportunity to reinforce his standing after the Quidditch World Cup. Then the "Quibbler Situation" with Harry Potter collided with the "Black Situation," and things had spun out of control. Dumbledore, the minister had concluded seemed to be losing grip on his magical menagerie.

Senior Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic Dolores Umbridge was to replace ill and absent Barty Crouch. It was a political damage control maneuver, and nothing more. Percy Weasley would just have to deal with that. That was precisely how the Undersecretary found herself seated on the far left, and closest to the action, with Griphook, who took a great delight in giving a toothless smile to Umbridge every time she attempted to glare at the goblin.

Luna pulled Hermione in to a hug, "How's Harry?"

She laughed, "He was the one reassuring me that everything was going to be alright!" They all laughed at that, but the nerves were visible to all who knew where to look. Luna was not her normal dreamy self as her foot vibrated like jackrabbit on steroids. Ginny had gone slightly pale, a stark contrast to Colin who was an interesting shade of green. The Twins were still laughing and joking, promoting the various different pieces of homemade prankster merchandise, but their smiles were tight. Seated closest to the bushy haired teen, Luna felt her go rigid as the first was part herded and part hauled in to the enclosure, "Fuck me!" she whispered.

The Sweedish Short-snout, was huge, at least the size of a pair of overweight rhinoceros, winged with claws and vicious fangs in place of horn. Add to that, the ability to breathe fire and it seemed like Hermione's worst nightmare was about to come true, "The champions have to face that?"

Ginny nodded, "One each... and if Harry's luck holds..." They all knew that it meant he would get the largest, nastiest, meanest dragon in all existence.

"That would be an Argentinean Silverback but those are extinct," thought Hermione, "I hope!"

Its scales were a silvery blue and it was clear that the dragon did not appreciate its predicament, following Cedric back and forth. A burst of sapphire colored flame lanced out. He dived behind cover. The top portion of his rocky outcrop was now molten slag.

Dragons fortunately cannot breathe a continuous stream of fire for more than ten or fifteen seconds - at least nesting mothers will not to conserve their strength. Over the constant roars of the dragon, they could catch only fragments of the commentary from Ludo Bagman, "...Oooh, narrow miss there, very narrow..." Dodging from one rocky outcrop to the next, Cedric circled around and pretty much where he wanted to be, ten feet from the clutch of eggs. Waving his wand in a complicated pattern, he transfigured a rock in to a dog and sent it out to do battle with the dragon. The Yorkshire terrier is the smallest of its breed but has no lack of courage as it charged to engage its foe that had more than a hundred times the size advantage.

Cedric dashed out, his twelve-inch wand extended before him, "Accio!" he whispered. The golden egg flew from within the nest and he caught it with one arm. He heard the roar, and was barely able to turn in time to see the dragon reduce his terrier to a fine ash. Cedric felt pain explode along his left arm, shoulder and the side of his face. However, fortunately he had completed the task as he managed to scramble clear of the dragon as Bagman shouted his success to the crowd, "...Very good indeed! And now the marks from the judges!"

"Miss Delacour, if you please!" The Veela stood tall, and proud before the dragon and began to do the unexpected. She began to sing, quietly at first, but slowly letting her voice drift in range and

then power, as she unleashed the full force of her Veela charm. The dragon was enchanted, its head swaying from side to side as it followed her slow movement. The men in the crowd were doing pretty much the same thing. The dragon was simply enchanted and gave an almost sleepy snort of contentment as its head drooped, coming to rest on its fore claws and began to snore.

Fleur advanced, singing all the while. It absent-mindedly scratched its nose with a fore claw, and continued to snore like a tank engine. A burst of flame leapt from its nose and caught her robes. Fleur extinguished the burning edge of her robes with a burst of water. Fast asleep, she continued to sing until she had walked in and walked out of the nest, holding her egg high. The Welsh Green continued to sleep. It was the calmest the dragon had been in days.

"And here comes Mr. Krum!"

Victor stood his ground before the Chinese Fireball and it lived up to its name, unleashing multiple balls of fire in a dangerous spread that hammered shallow ash black craters three feet apart. Victor met the baleful eyes of the dragon, whipped his wand up, around, and thrust forward slightly, firing the first curse of the Tri-wizard tournament: "Conjunctivito!"

"Very daring!" Bagman was yelling as the Dragon went on a blind rampage, unleashing fireballs in a rough arc at the ground directly in front of itself in an attempt to protect its eggs by sheer volume of fire. But it is tiring, and draining on a Dragon's magic, and the creature slumped and then staggered somewhat, crushing several of its own eggs that only served to renew its anger. Fortunately, it was now facing the wrong direction. Dodging flaying tail the Quidditch sensation retrieved his egg.

Gringotts knew how to look after its Champion. Where the other champions had entered wearing little more than their robes, Harry wore the dragon scale armor of the Bha-zhak Kha-dorath. The scales were paint, giving the entire set a tarnished silver look that did little to detract from its appearance. He wore a heavy cloak across his shoulders and silence descended as the stadium studied Harry as he stalked from the Champions tent and paused, critically eyeing the second nastiest dragon on the face of the planet: The Hungarian Horntail. It had taken almost a dozen dragon handlers just to maneuver the beast in to the enclosure.

All dragons are capable of manipulating fire in some form, whether a cone of flame; or explosive flaming orbs. The horntail however, seemed capable of producing a molten stream that super heated the rocks Harry was using for cover. "Retrieve the Golden Egg," he muttered darkly as he dove and weaved his way between cover, and the creature's flaming halitosis. He had not counted on the horned and spiked covered tail that whipped round and narrowly missed and gouged a scar through the ground. Diving back behind cover for the moment, he took a breath, "Accio Golden Egg!"

Unsurprisingly, that had no effect: He was too far from the egg and the dragon's innate magic was no doubt blocking his spell. However, the dragon had felt the spell targeting something in her nest. Irritated before, now she was pissed off. Twin streams of fire chased Harry the width of the quarry before the horntail let up for a moment.

"Accio Firebolt! Bombarda Maxima!" the quarry seemed to blow itself apart as the rocks disintegrated in to fist sized lumps filling the air with dust and smoke as he recast the spell and continued his demolition work. With the cloud of smoke hiding him from judges and spectators alike, he levitated the mass of rubble and banished it at the dragon's nest.

The Horntail saw the incoming rock shower and recoiled, curling its tail and draping a wing over its nest to protect its eggs from the incoming rock storm. However, it never stopped scanning for the annoying single mouthful snack. There was, however no trace of Harry and it drew a rumbling breath as it retracted its wing to check its eggs.

From inside the nest, Harry took flight, carrying the Golden Egg under one arm as he corkscrewed to the left, "Great Scott, he can fly!" yelled Bagman as the crowd shrieked and gasped. "Are you watching this, Mr. Krum?" He gained altitude, putting him beyond the reach of the nesting horntail that roared in unbridled rage.

Hermione would have probably passed out, were it not for the support of her friends, who were pretty much holding his brown-haired girlfriend and each other upright throughout the entire trial. They cheered louder than anyone else as Harry dismounted his broom and slung it casually over one shoulder, standing before the gathered judges, "Omelet anyone?"

Ms. Umbridge could only stare in amazement at the youngest champion's accomplishment when Bagman made a surprising announcement, "...youngest champion also the fastest to complete the task! This will no doubt shorten the odds on Mr. Potter!" Whatever the marks were, Harry frankly did not care. First, to reach him was Hermione who practically leapt on to him, and kissed him until he was nearly senseless.

His retinue were a short distance away watching with undisguised amusement as the other champions and Ludo Bagman joined the couple, "Harry, you received a total of forty four points, and have tied for first place with Victor Krum," explained Bagman, "If you'll just join the other champions for a moment..." Harry reentered the tent, which somehow looked quite different now: friendly and welcoming. He thought back to how he had felt while dodging the Horntail, and compared it to the long wait before he had walked out to face it... There was no comparison: The task itself was nothing compared to the wait. Fleur, Cedric, and Krum all came in together. A thick orange paste covered one side of Cedric's face that was presumably mending his burn. He grinned at Harry when he saw him, "Good one, Harry."

"And you," said Harry, grinning back.

"Well done, all of you!" said Ludo Bagman, bouncing into the tent and looking as pleased as though he personally had just got past a dragon. "Now, just a quick few words. You've got a nice long break before the second task, which will take place at half past nine on the morning of February the twenty-fourth - but we're giving you something to think about in the meantime! If you look down at those golden eggs you're all holding, you will see that they open... see the hinges there? You need to solve the clue inside the egg - because it will tell you what the second task is, and enable you to prepare for it! All clear? Sure? Well, off you go, then!"

Cho Chang had watched and she was now on the verge of tears. She could have had it made and instead everything had gone wrong. Harry had seen to it that she had lost her position as prefect over Loony Lovegood! She thought that the tournament was taking too much time away from her and Cedric. They had fought and argued constantly about that and then she had forbidden him from attending Potter's dinner party because she was not invited. That had been

the last straw! Luna. Everything had started going wrong because of Luna! All because she had suddenly had an all-powerful friend! Revenge, she swore quietly, would be hers.

The residence was the site of a unique dinner that evening. The guest list was not overly long, but the first guests to arrive were the three Champions from their respective schools. Cedric Diggory arrived and Fleur Delacour followed shortly. Victor arrived slightly later and apologized for his tardiness - something to do with Headmaster Karkaroff trying to prevent him from attending.

Harry had considered the number of expected and unexpected guests and decided to leave the passage down from Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, permanently. With the number of guards, and the wards, it was a practical solution as nobody else spoke Parseltongue. Though the Floo was something of a security breach, a quartet of Axe Masters stood guard, one in each corner of the small foyer.

The rest of the guests arrived shortly thereafter and the final count was three triwizard champions, a matching number of Hogwarts professors and another half dozen students when the final two guests, made their entrance via the Floo, both landing gracefully: Amelia Bones, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and Senior Accounts Manager Griphook of Gringotts. It was an awkward first few minutes for everyone, not due to the difference in just race but also due to the differences in age. Conversation gradually developed its own flow and rhythm, shifting and morphing back and forth between topics with no one dominating and everyone participating, as talk eventually turned to the shape of the wizarding world during dessert. Dobby had outdone himself with a rich molten chocolate cake, "The tournament was supposed to be about building relationships, friendships between rivals schools but it's not happening," said Harry.

Luna shrugged, "The tournament in many ways, reflects the state of the wizarding public," the comment drew a glance from Amelia Bones; "You've taken control of your public relations through the Quibbler and published the truth. The last edition and three reprints sold out in record time... we're expanding to cope with the demand."

Harry let his attention wander around the table, listening to everything but commenting on nothing for the moment, until the

conversation moved to a topic of interest, "...victory, fame and honor for my school are certainly considerations but I would be more interesting in finishing this tournament with friends," said Fleur.

Victor was also nodding, "My main reason for coming to Hogwarts was to hopefully make friends but our headmaster has us virtually confined to the ship, he is obsessed with victory. I am not. I become a professional Quidditch player this summer and a bad injury could end my career before it begins." It turned out that while an international Quidditch superstar, the Bulgarian was quiet and reserved, preferring a simple life, spending his free time working for one of several different charities near the modest home he shared with his parents.

It was Cedric that brought up a principal point of concern, "But what happens when the prophet get its hands on this? The fact that the four of us are suddenly friends yet supposed to be competing against one another. You worked a deal for your protection," acknowledged Cedric with a nod towards Harry, "I'm just surprised that the Quibbler" he shot an apologetic glance towards Luna, "could afford to pay you."

Harry laughed, "I sold my rights to the Quibbler for one galleon, and Griphook," the Goblin gave a polite smile, "was kind enough to draw up the contract. So everything was legal and above board. Best deal I ever made!"

Victor was sure that somebody has hit him with a bludger and that his hearing was suddenly deficit, "One Galleon? Exclusive rights for one Galleon?" the Bulgarian rumbled.

"I got what I wanted: Media protection. It was worth it."

"I can see the benefits Harry," the Bulgarian's eyes literally smashed their way across the room to where Luna and Penelope were still deep in discussion, "Do you think the Quibbler could offer me a similar deal, for the duration of the tournament? I have no desire to read in the Prophet that some student of Hogwarts, or Beauxbaton is having my love child...."

"You could do worse than a student Victor," said Cedric with a grin, "A professor or two perhaps..." he didn't have to complete the speculation as Victor's eyes took on house elf proportions as his eye

brows almost disappeared in to his hair as the professors in attendance looked equally scandalized.

"I know that you three have hardly had fair treatment at the hands of the Prophet," a remarkable understatement considering Rita Skeeter's article on the Weighing of the Wands ceremony, while devoid of his picture had failed to get the names or the other champions and their schools correct.

Victor grunted in agreement, "If you trust this, Quibbler..."

Hermione raised a hand in warning, "They are still a paper, but they publish the facts and the truth whether you do good or evil. You would get the right to reply..." That was good enough for Victor and Cedric. Fleur needed no convincing that media protection would be a good idea. Griphook produced three contracts, moments later they were enveloped in the gentle blue glow before Luna sat down to interview the three champions while Colin, who was never far from his camera, snapped a selection of pictures.

The hour grew late and all, whether student, staff or champion began to take their leave though it was not lost on anyone that the head of the DMLE was staying. Finally, alone, Harry moved things along, "Ms. Bones, thank you for agreeing to meet me in private."

She smiled, "I have to admit, I was rather surprised at your invitation. To what does this pertain?" one does not rise to one of the highest positions in magical government by being blind to the obvious. She could tell in which direction this was going and what, or more precisely, whom the conversation was going to be about, but she wanted to hear him say it, and not jump the wand, so to speak.

"My Godfather ma'am, explained Harry in all seriousness, "Mr. Sirius Orion Black."

Hermione went to bed but Harry had a long, blow-by-blow account for Sirius, including his conversation with Ms. Bones that made it clear: Only a pardon from the Minister of Magic could exonerate him. Hedwig ruffled her feathers at the sheer length of the letter, and gave a soft hoot of protest. However, Hedwig took the letter with the quiet self-assured dignity of her kind and flapped in to the night. Despite the first task, a successful dinner party, and half an hour

writing the letter, the young man wandered in to the training area, activated the dummies and began to duel.

His dueling style had evolved as he stole ideas and tactics from all of his tutors, and while capable of holding his own against for an extended period, he was no closer to defeating Griphook or any of his other tutors and professors. The night wore on and the stack of destroyed dummies entered double digits when Harry set to work against two dummies at once. Finally, it was almost three in the morning when the young man hit the showers and the collapsed in to bed.

Igor Karkaroff was alone in his private quarters aboard the vessel, and sat frozen with the shot glass half way between the table and his lips. His hand shook for an instant but then steadied, "It takes a great deal of courage to ambush a man from behind."

"Good evening Igor," said Moody, "You're looking remarkably well." Igor dropped the glass, all color draining from his face, "I'm here to extend an invitation from our master who can't wait to renew your acquaintance." Igor felt his blood turn to ice with the thought of meeting the Dark Lord again, but the Auror who had captured him. When had Alastor "Mad Eye" Moony ever been sympathetic to the Dark Lord! "You can be of use to our master, with access to the grounds and tournament venues and the castle itself. This is the only reason that you are still alive!"

That simple statement reduced Igor to tears of terror, "Please, Alastor, I'm a dead man if I appear in front of my...our master, I can't go back."

"Return willingly and take your chances or I will send your corpse," growled the Auror as he dropped an old boot on the table.

The trembling headmaster unwillingly took it.

Chapter 10

The Politics of Being Champion

Despite the successes enjoyed by all four champions during the first task of the tournament, things had been on a slow boil within Hogwarts, and Gryffindor specifically. The Ravenclaws viewed Luna as a traitor to their house for having taken up Harry on his offer and made her life uncomfortable whenever possible, especially in classes where Harry and others were not around. Though she bore it with the same stoicism she always had, word had travelled back to Harry, who was, in a word: Pissed.

Adding fuel to the metaphorical fire was Ron, who had effectively turned his back on everyone in Gryffindor to spend time with his new friends in Slytherin. Although not said aloud, gossip judged Harry guilty and Hermione guilty by association, as was the youngest of the Weaselys and the twins. There had been more than a few arguments, some harsh words and on several occasions drawn wands. Harry vowed silently it would go no farther than that.

Hermione was not in direct opposition to the solution, even though it had lead to an argument – their first as a couple but disagreement, someone had once said, is not the same as disloyalty. Though things were slightly cool between the two they were not frigid. Hermione had been asking Dobby a number of questions about House Elves. As it happened, many house elves were very happy with their lot in life and did not want things to change. Dobby it seemed, really was the weirdo in his breed, "Even Winky was able to find work at Hogwarts, miss!" said Dobby.

"Winky?" said Harry. "She's here too?"

"Yes, sir, yes!" said Dobby, "Would sir like to see Winky?"

That morning, accompanied by his girlfriend and Neville who had the morning period free, they followed the hyperactive house elf in to the kitchens. Hermione gaped at their sheer number. At least a hundred, perhaps as many as two hundred moved around, side stepped, walked, ran and seemed to just apparate around them. With Dobby leading the way, they passed in between four long wooden tables that Harry guessed positioned exactly beneath the four house tables in the Great Hall directly above them. Many of the house elves

paused in mid task to smile, bow or curtsy. All of the elves were dressed in a similar uniform of a tea towel that bore the Hogwarts crest worn like a toga.

The sheer vastness of the kitchens was astounding, seemingly stretching on forever in to the distance until they finally stopped in front of one of the many brick fireplaces dotted around the room, "Winky! Sir!" said the house elf.

She sat on a stool by the fire, hunched over. Her skirt and blouse matched the blue hat that had holes in her for her ears. Where Dobby's mismatched ensemble was clean and pressed like those of the other house elves, Winky's clothes were torn, stained and in general, disarray, "Hello, Winky," said Harry.

The elf's lips quivered and then she erupted in to tears that splashed down her front. The two teens who had been at the Quidditch world cup remembered the tears that the unfortunate elf had shed, "Oh...dear," said Hermione, "Winky, don't cry, please don't..." Her words only had the opposite effect as she cried harder than ever.

"Would Harry Potter like a cup of tea?" asked Dobby

"Er - yeah, okay," said Harry. Instantly, about six house-elves came trotting up behind him, bearing a large silver tray laden with a teapot, cups for Harry, Hermione, and Neville, a milk jug, and a large plate of biscuits.

Neville took a cup of tea, "thank you," he said quietly. The elves all looked delighted, bowed low, their ears almost sweeping the ground as they retreated.

"How long has she been here Dobby?" asked Harry.

"Only a week. Harry Potter, sir!" said Dobby happily. Winky curled and balanced on her stool as the volume of her crying increased, "Dobby goes to visit Winky, and finds out Winky has been freed too, sir!" said Dobby his ears bent unnaturally low as she threw herself off the stool and lay face-down on the flagstones of the kitchen floor, and screamed in misery.

Hermione hastily dropped down to her knees beside her and tried to comfort her, but nothing she said made the slightest difference.

Dobby continued with his story, shouting shrilly over Winky's screeches that had raised an octave, "And Dobby manages to find Winky work at Hogwarts sir! But because we are free elves, we must be paid..."

Winky suddenly stopped in mid screech and glared at Dobby with her massive brown eyes, her face sopping wet and suddenly furious, "Winky is a disgraced elf, but Winky is not yet getting paid!" she squeaked. "Winky is not sunk so low as that! Winky is properly ashamed of being freed! Mr. Crouch is a good wizard, miss! Mr. Crouch is right to sack bad Winky!"

"Winky is having trouble adjusting, Harry Potter," squeaked Dobby confidentially, "She is not taking her pay, and Winky forgets she is not bound to Mr. Crouch anymore; she is allowed to speak her mind now, but she won't do it."

"Can't house-elves speak their minds about their masters, then?" Harry asked.

"Oh no, sir, no," said Dobby, looking suddenly serious. "'Tis part of the house-elf's enslavement, sir. We keeps their secrets and our silence, sir. We upholds the family's honor, and we never speaks ill of them."

Harry glanced at the still, silent house elf, and made a decision, "Winky," said Harry, "Would you like to work for me?" Suddenly, the hustle and bustle of the kitchen stopped. You could have heard a pin drop in the silence as every house elf stared at Harry in disbelief. Hermione was equally shocked, "You work for me, you work like any normal house elf," said Harry, "But, you will get days off like Dobby, because you were a...a bad house elf." Winky had dried her eyes, and was not exactly sure what to make of the offer.

"Would Winky have to wear clothes?"

"Winky would have to wear a uniform, NOT clothes," said Harry, "You can make your own uniform but it must be a nice uniform that you take care of."

Winky rose to her feet and for the first time, met the young man's gaze, "You, would take Winky as servant? If Winky wear uniform

and has... days off?" she sounded hopeful, "Like Dobby, sir? Two... days each month?"

"Yes," Harry said firmly, "But what you do on your one day off..." he did not complete the sentence, hoping that the house elf would catch on. She did. Standing up, she stood at her full height and snapped her fingers.

Instantly her Hogwarts uniform was mended, clean and pressed. She stood ramrod straight before Harry, and snapped her fingers again, removing the Hogwarts crest from her blouse, which she handed to one of the other house elves, and bowed low to him, "Winky is happy to be in the service of Harry Potter! Sir!"

It was as if somebody had turned the background back on as the kitchen resumed operation, "Dobby, please show Winky to the Residence and explain her tasks, duties and responsibilities to her." He glanced at his watch, "We better be going... we're all going to be late for class!"

As they prepared to take their leave, many of the surrounding elves pressed in upon them, offering snacks, whispering "thank you" or just large, almost embarrassed smiles and many low bows. Hermione had a slightly pained expression on her face. "You know what?" said Neville, "All these years I've been really impressed with Fred and George, nicking food from the kitchens. The elves just can't wait to give it all away..."

Hermione however rounded on Harry like a tornado let out of a box, "Harry! How could you!" she was shocked, and hurt that he would do such a thing, especially since he knew how she felt about house elves.

"Hermione, what would you have me do?" asked Harry as he ran a hand through his already disheveled hair, "I couldn't leave her like that! Freedom may suit Dobby, but it was killing her! She's happy, and," Harry said slyly, "I said she works for me, does what any house elf does, but I did not bond her to me. She can leave if she asks."

"Harry, there's a Slytherin in you somewhere," remarked Neville as he made his way towards the greenhouses, giving the couple a few minutes alone. If only Neville knew the truth about Harry and what

the Sorting Hat had said to him just two years ago when he was the alleged heir of Slytherin. Hermione had to agree that Harry had found an excellent loophole, and she realized that Winky was but a small demonstration of just how much of a cunning Slytherin lurked beneath the skin of the Gryffindor lion. "Just remember, 'Mione, we're meeting Professor McGonagall between classes," he gave her a slightly roguish wink, "and if we don't spend the whole break in her office...." She blushed, gave him a peck on the cheek and ran after Neville. Yes, there were definitely better things to do during a break between classes.

Professor Minerva McGonagall, Transfiguration Professor, Head of Gryffindor House and Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts School and Witchcraft and Wizardry in her office on the first floor of the Defense Against the Dark Arts tower, had just revived the flagging fireplace when there was a knock at her door. "Mr. Potter, Ms. Granger," she greeted them politely, "What can I do for you?" she gestured for them to have a seat, conjuring tea and a platter of biscuits.

Both took a cup of tea, Hermione with sugar, Harry without, and took a sip, buying a moment to review his arguments. Minerva glanced at the platter of biscuits, wondering why the students never, ever took one, "I was wondering if I could arrange for my retinue to join me in my residence, for the duration of the tournament," he handed over a copy of the rules, courtesy of Griphook, "per the highlighted section."

She read in silence, tomb like silence for several minutes, rereading the passage several times, "Mr. Potter, you are perfectly within your rights as champion to simply move your retinue without consulting a member of the faculty," she tapped a further subsection that Harry had not highlighted.

He nodded, "I may be an emancipated minor, but I don't have full emancipation. I would rather get permission than ask for forgiveness later. My choices affect more than just me. I do not intend to make choices for my friends."

Professor McGonagall raked the teens with her trademark stern glance, "I do realize that there are a number of problems, between you and the headmaster. I presume that is why you came to me?"

"Partly," admitted Harry, "I want permission for my friends to move in to my residence, whether it's on a more permanent arrangement

while they attend their regular classes, or just to spend the night on weekends. There was a small measure of acidity in his voice, "I want the permission to allow my friends, and tutors to chose. I will be making a similar request to Professor Flitwick about getting Luna out of the Ravenclaw for the duration of the tournament." What to do next year was a question for another time.

She studied the boy seated before her and realized that he was not so much a boy any more, nor had he ever been much of one. She had subscriptions to both the Quibbler and the Daily Prophet and knew the full account, as told by both sides. What surprised her was that both accounts contained a great deal of truth, the former due to an agreement. The later made Harry out as a manipulator capable of disguising, shading and misdirecting, which she had to admit was the truth as he was doing it right now, to her, to avoid confrontation in search of a compromise, "Headmaster Dumbledore is unlikely to approve of seven teenagers living together, without adult supervision."

Harry shook his head, "Mr. Lupin will be there, one of several different instructors that I have teaching me at the moment. And you've met Griphook." Indeed, she had, for the Goblin had been on his best behavior the night before and somewhat charming in his own way, "He tends to be around most evenings, and Professor Flitwick is one of my instructors who drops by at all hours... he might have actually spent the night once. As one of my tutors, the same courtesy is extended to you: Visit when you please, and by all means stay the night if you choose."

"Very well Mr. Potter," it was clear that Harry was receiving a fairly well rounded education that include negotiating and haggling from those who do such things for a living, "I trust you will handle the headmaster in your own fashion. I agree but I have certain conditions: I reserve the right to visit without giving prior notice," she didn't have to say why, but this was an acceptable, "Secondly, I would like to attend your training, to ensure that you will be able to pass your OWL examinations." Expected and reasonable, "Thirdly," she said in a slight rush, "the recipe for last night's desert."

The two teens smiled and Hermione reached in to her pocket, "I can help you with the last request..." opening the parchment, the professor was delighted to find the recipe for Dobby's Molten Chocolate Cake. With a wave of his wand, Harry had vanished the

cookies and replaced the platter with a small box from his pocket, "Engorgio!"

He lifted the top and the smell of warm chocolate drifted out and enveloped the room in a fragrant haze, "Your terms, are entirely reasonable, and acceptable," said Harry as another wave of his wand transfigured a small teaspoon in to a passable knife, and presented it handle first to the transfiguration professor, "Would you care to do the honors?"

A similar meeting with Professor Flitwick during the lunch break after Care for Magical Creatures went as well, "Mr. Potter, as I promised you, I have also looked in to another matter." The temperature dropped a fraction of a degree, "And it is to my everlasting shame to discover that I had severely let down one of my own." It had not taken long for Flitwick to put the pieces together: Luna, alone in a corner of the Library, eating by herself, spending time wandering the corridors of the castle aimlessly, alone on Hogsmeade weekend trips the year before. Quiet, unobtrusive, seemingly happy and cheerful but ultimately alone, was the professor's final assessment of Luna. Small wonder that she'd leapt without looking at the opportunity to escape an environment where she was the target of incessant bullying "just because she was "Loony Lovegood.""

He had originally wondered how it was that the pair of Gryffindors had so easily welcomed and accepted the pureblood in to their ranks but then again, the half blood champion and muggleborn witch who stood beside him had been shunned, reviled and hated on numerous occasions for reasons that ranged from the sublime to the ridiculous. Luna was taking Ron's place, or perhaps Neville was taking Ron's place. Perhaps there would soon be no Golden Trio, but something better in its place, "I have spoken to Miss Lovegood and, apologized to her for as her head of house, I failed her." The frank and honest admission of guilt surprised Harry and he found himself uncharitably wondering whether Dumbledore could admit he was fallible. "Those responsible have been dealt with." Flitwick's punishments had done incredible damage to his own house: The Ravenclaw Quidditch team was short a Seeker, Chaser and Keeper, a new prefect needed to be appointed, and the points lost made it unlikely that Ravenclaw would place above third for the House Cup next year.

In Dolores's opinion the first task had proceeded splendidly well and as she rose and made her way to the small lectern during dinner she had a confident smile. "Ahem-hem, could I have your attention please?" conversation in the great hall stopped, as many of the student wondered who the ugly toad was, "I am Senior Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic, Dolores Jane Umbridge." Her voice was crunchy on the outside yet somehow chewy on the inside, rather like the chocolate frosted sugar bombs breakfast cereal that Dudley devoured by the crate thought Harry.

It was just as well that the squat, mousy brown haired woman did not have eyes in the back of her head. Professor McGonagall's stare would have petrified a Basilisk. Even the Seventh Years could recall ever seeing her so angry. The professor did have her reasons: Dolores had just appeared in the great hall, joined them for dinner without an invitation, and then interrupted the meal to address the students without even asking the headmaster for permission. "Tomorrow there will be a photo session for the champions with the British Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, and interviews so that the public can get to know the champions."

Harry was trying his hardest not to laugh aloud at the mention of a "photo session," but a glance across the great hall saw him catch the eye of first Cedric then Fleur and finally Victor, all of whom wore expressions of surprise with varying degrees of amusement. There was a chortle of polite laughter as Harry struggled to contain himself. Dolores was understandably shocked at the interruption, by a student no less but retained her composure when she saw Harry Potter laughing as politely as possible, "Is there a problem Mr. Potter?"

"I am afraid there is. I have signed an exclusivity contract with the Quibbler, and cannot appear in any other publication till after the tournament is over." Harry gave her a moment to acknowledge that fact with a nod and then dropped the hammer, "As have my fellow champions from Beauxbatons, Hogwarts and Durmstrang."

She gritted her teeth, and forced her voice back to its breakfast cereal demeanor, "Regardless, the Ministry will be sponsoring the Yule Ball, on Christmas day, in honor of the four champions." Dolores could not see any way she could lose with this particular proposition.

Viktor stood, "I protest to this. It is an intrusion upon my time!" he was almost growling out the words, but even with his accent, it was clear he was not pleased with this particular turn of events.

All pretenses of politeness and civility left Dolores, "You!" she spat, "signed a magically binding contract and you will do as you are told!"

Victor had faced down bloodthirsty reporters, over eager fan girls – and a few fan boys - bludgers, beater bats, two death threats, cut throat team managers and worse. Delores Umbridge simply did not register on his threat assessment, "It is beyond a doubt that I signed a magical contract to compete in the Tri-wizard tournament, but there was no mention of a Yule Ball or any Ball in the rules! As it is not in the rules, then it is for the champions to agree to attend! Not their schools! Nor Professors! And certainly not government officials who have nothing to do with the management or operation of the Tournament!" it was perhaps the longest speech that anyone had heard from the Quidditch star.

Dumbledore, Harry correctly assumed could not resist attempting to be the grandfatherly mediator but he handled the situation deftly, "While Hogwarts is definitely able to host the Yule Ball, it would be a shame for the event to be short a Champion," he said amicably. "However, you would be within your rights to refuse to attend the Yule Ball, but in the spirit of international cooperation, to build friendships you can understand why we hope you would attend this event?"

Victor glared at Umbridge, "Given that you are issuing an invitation to attend, Headmaster Dumbledore, I would be honored to accept, and attend the Yule Ball at Hogwarts School on Christmas Day." He sat down and the girls around him were all incredibly a flutter: It was just possible that they could snare a Champion and Quidditch superstar as their date!

Minerva realized that whatever his faults were, the headmaster was still on the job. However, she was much less worried about Harry and his circle of friends and other champions. It was clear that all four of them had the measure of Ms. Delores Umbridge.

Dolores Umbridge would not forget this, or any of them, especially Harry Potter. He would pay for this, and so would Dumbledore she

swore to herself. If she could have made a blood oath in that moment, she probably would have.

Chapter 11

The Yule ball

The weeks leading up to the Yule Ball were busy for a variety of reasons. Even though the girls had all brought something in the form of dress robes, many were lamenting that they were not exactly suitable for a Yule Ball. As a result, Gladrags Wizardwear in Hogmeade was doing a roaring business by catalogue, owl post and with a few of the senior students who had snuck off school grounds. Those that managed to escape successfully were more often than not, apprehended upon their return to the delight of the caretaker Argus Filch.

Harry and his friends however, faced no such difficulties as a quick message to Griphook had seen the goblin bring not only a vast array of catalogues, but also Madam Malkin herself to supervise the measuring and then creation of their dresses and robes. For the men, it was simple: Let Madam Malkin take their measurements and add the appropriate complimentary touches. The women however, had a great deal more work ahead of them as they savaged several dozen catalogues in search of something suitable.

Luna and Colin had fast become friends, then confidants and it was no surprise to the others when he had plucked up the courage to ask her to attend the ball. She had accepted and Harry had smiled when he heard about it, glad that Luna was coming out of her shell and growing in to her own. The rest of the girls had been more than willing to help make sure that the all-important first date went well and judging by their expressions, she was wearing the perfect dress. The blond was genuinely happy for the first time in several years – so much so that her feet didn't really touch the ground as she helped the others find their own perfect dresses.

It was rather strange, Harry mused as he looked across the living room of the residence: Nearly everyone present was dating someone else who was present: Harry was with Hermione, Cedric and Fleur had come together quietly and discreetly, but it was clear to everyone present something was going on there. Luna and Colin made a good couple if for no other reason than Colin grounded Luna slightly, while she kept him from being too firmly anchored to the ground. Ginny and Neville, sometimes he wondered what could have been, if it had been him and Ginny. It was idle speculation, as

Harry knew he would not trade Hermione for anything. The only ones dating someone on the "outside" were the twins Fred and George with Angelina and Katie respectively.

Potential trouble only raised its head once in the week leading up to the Yule Ball: Luna still did her own thing, but as a close friend of Harry Potter, nobody had disturbed her in many days. Some people have to upset the peaceful status quo. Staring out a window, admiring the lush landscape, a voice cut in to Luna's reflections, "Hey Loony! Heard Colin asked you to the Ball, too bad you're both going as Potter's lap dogs!"

Luna smiled serenely, "I know Colin would have asked me if he could attend. Harry made sure that all of his friends would be able to attend. I get to spend the evening with my boyfriend and my friends," she explained patiently and shrugged, "Who are you going with Cho?" there was no malice or rancor in Luna's question, "Is Cedric taking you to the ball?" That was Luna's return shot.

"That bitch Veela got her hooks in to my boyfriend! And there is nothing anyone can do to stop that charm! So you better hope she doesn't get her sights on your boyfriend!" Cho went on for several long sentences about what she would like to do to Fleur given half a chance.

Mild mannered and easy going, kind hearted with a unique worldview. There was a sudden fire in Luna as she took two steps closer to Cho, her hand clipping a stray lock of hair behind her ear. The same motion brought her wand in to her hand, "Fleur and Cedric are friends of mine," she said dangerously quiet, "And she had no need of her Veela charm to attract or keep Cedric interested."

Cho went from angry to enraged, at this little weirdo tramps insinuation, "Says the loony one who thinks she has friends! They need you for your daddy's precious paper! They couldn't care two knuts about you!" her hand vanished in to a pocket on her robes, but before she could even grip her wand, Luna's was in hand with a bright smile that seemed at odds with her auroresque dueling stance.

Cho froze as the blond spoke, calm and serene as ever, "I live with Harry Potter, have been giving access to his tutors, trainers and instructors that include three Hogwarts professors, a Goblin Warrior,

and two Aurors of some reputation. I train and duel with the champions of the Triwizard Tournament. I may be Luna "Loony" Lovegood, but I'm quite sure a duel would end with one of us in the hospital wing."

"Still weird and unpopular," she sneered, "Why do you think your friends let you wander around the castle alone? Like I said..." Cho fired off a single curse. Luna seemed to float aside, letting it strike the wall.

The full body bind slammed in to her back and dropped her like a sack of stones. All she could do was glare hatefully with her eyes up at her attacker, "Weird... is a stretch. Luna has a unique and original view on things," Colin holstered his wand, as he collected the frozen witch's wand and dropped it on top of her frozen form, "Harry's friends, are never alone." Said Colin as he walked past her, revealing Ginny and Fleur Delacour standing some distance behind, "Sorry Luna, but she was not worth your effort," he paused as he studied the frozen witch, "Don't think she was worth mine either...." The group moved to take advantage of the sun shining outside.

It took Harry a few days to think it through, but he finally came to a realization and a decision: He was taking Hermione to the Yule Ball and he was going to have to dance.

It took a moment to track down the Librarian Pince and ask whether the library had any books on the subject. As a librarian at the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the country, she had received many strange requests, questions and enquiries. This one however, had her stumped. She was unwilling to admit that the school's collection was inadequate and had unearned a single volume entitled "Dance Amongst the Magical." He had the reflexes, the balance and the poise thanks to Quidditch and his own training. Memorizing the steps was easy enough with the aid of the chronological enchantments in the residence. Nevertheless, he knew he would need to actually practice with someone to go any further.

That was how Harry found himself in his current predicament, "Enter." He had knocked and a part of him had hoped that Professor McGonagall wouldn't be in... even though he'd waited under an invisibility spell to come up to her classroom. "Mr. Potter, what can I do for you?"

Considering everything he had faced, including face a Hungarian Horntail, he somehow found this to be amongst one of the most embarrassing things ever, "Professor McGonagall... I need your help with something, important..." she nodded and waited, "I need someone to practice dancing with." The normally stern transfiguration professor broke in to a very rare smile, "I've managed to learn the steps, but I'm not sure I can do them with a partner..."

"Ms. Granger can dance, having had lessons during her summer holidays for the past two years," confirmed Professor McGonagall, though how she knew that was beyond Harry, "I confess that I was not sure how to broach the subject, that the champions and their dates would open the ball with a waltz..."

"I was hoping that you would be able to practice with me, perhaps an hour a day for the next week or so?" he asked hopefully, "I'm sure I can ask Dobby to do some baking for me..." Professor Minerva McGonagall knew a bribe when she heard one, and if word ever got around about her weakness for chocolate, she was not sure whether she could live it down. Harry handed over a small box, "Charmed to stay warm..." The smile had not left Professor McGonagall's face as a wave of her wand music filled the room.

Things in the residence were also verging on normal, busy but as normal as possible between classes, private tutors, dance lessons and practices with the other champions, and training and coaching his retinue and friends. Without a doubt it was the happiest Harry, Hermione and Luna had been at Hogwarts. Of course, when Harry let slip to Neville that he was taking dance lessons, he had asked to join in, "Just as a refresher, you know? Can't be stepping on Ginny's toes all night..."

It had snowballed and the week before the ball had Professor McGonagall down in the residence, breaking bread with them every evening as she gave dance lessons to them all and they exchanged dance partners. She had no doubt that when they would effortlessly steal the spotlight.

The Yule Ball was only two days away when Hermione knocked on Harry's door, late one night after everyone else had gone to bed, "Harry... we need to talk about us." Seeing the nervousness on his face, she actually smiled and laughed, "No. don't worry," she leaned

forward, and kissed him, gently, before quickly pulling away, "Harry..." she found herself wondering just where the Gryffindor courage had gone. "Back under your bed, in the 4th year girl's dormitory in the tower when you knocked on the door," a cheeky voice in the back of her head answered,

"Harry... I need to... to tell you how I feel... it's that if I don't tell you, I'm scared that I'm going to one day just pounce you. I... I love you," The words came out in a rush, "But I don't know how to control what I'm feeling!"

He knew exactly what she was talking about, exactly what he was feeling, "I know. Mione, I don't want to push you in to something that you're not ready for...I don't know a lot... about this sort of thing but I don't want to ruin what we have by taking things too far too fast."

She smiled, that same smile he found so attractive, as she leaned in and kissed him, and somehow manipulated him on to his back where all he could do was stare up at her, "I guess," she said seductively, "I'll decide how far, to take things..." She started kissing him, moving her tongue against his lips, and he just followed her lead, acting purely on instinct, letting his tongue play against hers, ever so gently.

Instinct can be an incredibly powerful thing. His hands slid low down her back, tracing slow lines and circles that seemed to sear the skin. Somewhere along the way, she had pinned him to the mattress, and he did not care. His hands slid around her waist, working their way, slowly up her sides. She finally understood some the things she had read in those romance novels she kept hidden under her bed. Reading about it was one thing. To ache for touch, his touch was another, and then, to feel his hands... that was something else again....

He could feel her against his hands, along his fingertips, sparks like lightning dancing along his nerves. She moaned in pleasure as he reached up to kiss her. The bedrooms of the residence were charmed for silence, privacy and discretion as after all they were originally for champions of age. When Harry awoke the following morning, it took him a long minute to realize that the night before had not been another reoccurring dream, but reality. She was snuggled up against him, clad in nothing but her underwear - just like him.

Nobody else in residence had heard a thing and could not explain the smiles on both teens at breakfast that morning, or the next few mornings, including the day of the Yule Ball.

That evening, the champions opened the ball with their dance partners, all eight of them dancing the traditional waltz. Harry was somewhat nervous about dancing in front of not only Hogwarts but also the students from other schools, but also when he has his arms around Hermione, his concerns just vanished and the two of them did admirably well.

Headmaster Dumbledore smiled indulgently at the couples. Whatever their personal differences were both was determined not to spoil the night for everyone else. Igor Karkaroff wore an expression that reminded Harry too much of Professor Snape. Ludo Bagman was clad in purple robes with large yellow stars and had given the champions enthusiastic applause. Madame Maxime had exchanged her usual black satin uniform for a flowing gown of lavender silk, had applauded them politely. Griphook was in formal Goblin regalia, complete with silver cloak bore and red trim. That was when he noticed that Mr. Crouch was still missing, with Ms. Umbridge occupying his seat as far from Griphook as possible on the large round table.

They took their seats and the conversation was awkward to say the least, unlike his dinner party sometime back. The differences between not only the adults and teenagers but also the personal animosities present: Dumbledore and Harry, Delores and Griphook, Snape and Harry, Karkaroff and Victor, the list could go on for quite a while. The adults were clearly aware that something misspoken, or taken out of context could very well spark the next wizarding war. Only after the main course did things began to thaw and relax, "I'm afraid to say Mr. Crouch simply has not been well since the World Cup," explained Delores Umbridge, "It was a ministry fiasco and then the involvement of his house elf, Blinky or whatever her name was only complicated matters further as has the aftermath..."

"Our castle is not as big as Hogwarts or as comfortable," Victor was telling Hermione, "Fewer floors and the fires are lit for magical purposes only. But our grounds are much more extensive, including lakes and mountains..."

"Now, now, Viktor!" said Karkaroff with a laugh that didn't reach his stone cold eyes, "Don't go giving away anything else, now, or your charming friend will know exactly where to find us!"

Dumbledore smiled, his eyes twinkling. "Igor, all this secrecy... one would almost think you didn't want visitors."

"Well, Dumbledore," said Karkaroff, displaying his yellowing teeth fully, "we are all protective of our private domains, are we not? Do we not jealously guard the halls of learning entrusted to us? Are we not right to be proud that we alone know our school's secrets, and right to protect them?"

"Oh I would never dream of assuming I know all Hogwarts' secrets, Igor," said Dumbledore amicably. "Only this morning, for instance, I took a wrong turning on the way to the bathroom and found myself in a beautifully proportioned room I have never seen before, containing a really rather magnificent collection of chamber pots. When I went back to investigate more closely, I discovered that the room had vanished. However, I must keep an eye out for it. Possibly, it is only accessible at five-thirty in the morning. Or it may only appear at the quarter moon - or when the seeker has an exceptionally full bladder."

Harry snorted into his plate of goulash. Ms. Umbridge frowned, but Harry could have sworn Dumbledore had given him a very small wink as if the two were sharing a private joke.

With dinner over, Harry made a brief circuit of the room, before turning his attention to his girlfriend and his friends instead of hanging around groupies and hangers on. As the night progressed, Harry made sure to dance with all of the women in his group including Ginny and Fleur and Professor McGonagall. Throughout the ball, the champions stayed within their group, twirling confidently across the dance floor, no matter what the music was as they recieved jealous glares from wizards and witches alike

Luna was in her boyfriend's arms as they danced the last waltz together, thinking that this had been perhaps the best Christmas of her life. The atmosphere and company had made it all simply magical, even with very little visible magic on display. Harry had kept his word, ensuring that his friends would be able to attend.

Fleur Delacour was also having the best day of her life, sharing the last waltz with Cedric Diggory and those jealous girls' stares with Hermione. The champions had stayed inside their group all evening, much to the annoyance of some of the other students that circled like hyenas and vultures.

Victor had enjoyed a number of dances, and had shared several with a certain Hufflepuff 5th year. When asked about her, he had shrugged and said, "An old friend of the family." Otherwise, he was content to sit aside and just watch his friends. The word was somewhat strange to him but he liked the way "friends" sounded and all that it implied. He had danced with witches who treated him as an equal and had not drooled or slobbered over him like a demented fan girl. It was one of the few times in his life been able to relax and enjoy himself at a formal function.

There was, Cedric had quickly realized, more to Fleur than just her looks and that alluring charm of hers. She was as beautiful a person as she was physically attractive and he pondered his previous relationship with Cho: A witch on the high side of high maintenance with a jealous streak wide enough to park two Hungarian Horntails. He smiled and Fleur smiled back before whispering something in his ear that widened his smile in to a grin.

Ron eyes had drifted over the group on several times during the course of the night. He was not sure if he was more envious or jealous. His date seemed to have an understanding of how he felt, and her eyes had gone in the same direction as Ron, "Doesn't seem fair does it?" whispered Cho. Ron was her unlikely rescuer after her run in with Loony the previous week.

"It's not fair, because it isn't," growled Ron in agreement. Both sat on the side of the dance floor as Draco and Millicent danced past the seated couple. Crabbe and Goyle were not dancers in any way and neither had been able to find a date for the ball anyway. Ron noticed the pointed stare from Draco and caught on quick enough, "Ms. Chang," he said formally, "May I have this dance?"

Where Harry had arranged for Madam Malkin, Draco had arranged for Twilfit & Tattings to outfit not only him and Millicent but also Crabbe, Goyle, Ron who had comforted Cho after her run in with Luna. However, not officially a couple, the ball was their first date. Oddly enough, Daphne did not seem to mind. Ron looked

particularly dashing – at least he hoped so – in his new dress robes of a dark burned gold color with green trim. It was almost a stark contrast to Cho Chang's white silk brocade cheongsam but as they headed on to the dance floor, and like Draco and Millicent, stayed at the opposite end of it from Harry and his friends. Nobody was looking for trouble.

Sometime later as Hermione enjoyed a dance with Victor, Neville asked Harry, more out of curiosity, "You don't hold all the Weaselys in the same bracket do you?" the herbologist in training nodded to the far side of the great hall, where Ron and Cho were in discussion with several from the house of serpents.

"These three are amongst my closest friends. Ron... he used to be. But I won't dump them because of what their brother has done or is doing." He hesitated, "I'm not so rich in friends that I can afford to throw away three years of friendship. But Ron made his choice," he met Neville's gaze, "mate."

Neville was surprised but that remark earned him a chaste kiss from Ginny. The Prank Master Generals took that as a challenge and descended upon Harry energetically, giving theatrical kisses, "Forge! Forge! I just kissed the boy-who-lived! He's going to marry me!" it was incredibly just how high pitched and girly Fred voice suddenly was.

"I kissed him too! You're going to have to share him with me Gred!" retorted George, "And if you won't share him, I'll make you!" his voice, if anything was even more high pitched than Freds.

It was Victor who intervened, grabbing the laughing twins by an ear apiece, "Unhand him you rogues!" The Bulgarian was having, a difficult time keeping a straight face at their antics, "Or I shall surrender you to Ms. Granger for punishment!"

"You could just give them a place in the Potter harem," said Luna, "At least then you could lock them in the residence... and keep the castle safe from their pranking antics..." The idea had some merit.

Albus Dumbledore watched the champion's party with a critical eye. "Remarkable isn't it?" commented Professor McGonagall, standing next to him, her tone neutral, "Students from three houses and three schools. Mixed house couples and even an inter school couple."

Dumbledore said nothing as he observed the changes in the students, especially Luna Lovegood who was not on the fringes but a full part of the group. The strange young girl had vanished. The same for Ginny Weasley, full engaged with her boyfriend, no longer haunted by her past. Yes. Things were changing.

Professor McGonagall eyes wandered and noted Ron, his date and their choice of company, from Slytherin House. No doubt, Professor Snape was uncertain what to make of the situation. Moreover, so was she, especially over Ron's academic achievement, without Hermione to help him.

The day after the Yule Ball, everyone slept in and woke up either late or very late except for Luna and Colin. The pair had never gone to bed after their moonlight stroll where they spent much of their time star gazing as well. They had also been gazing at a different set of moving stars, sorting through the few hundred pictures that Colin had taken and deciding on which ones to send to Luna's father for the next issue of the Quibbler.

Colin turned out to be the typical Gryffindor, and had gotten over his hero worship of Harry and formed a solid friendship with the champion. His relationship with Luna was something else that had changed in the past few months. Both were new to the experience and they were taking things slowly as both were mature enough to realize they were not ready for too much

That and Colin knew that if he did somehow hurt Luna, it would mean a world of trouble, assuming he survived whatever Xenophilius Lovegood did to him: Harry and Hermione would be waiting with drawn wands.

Griphook was sitting in his office wearing a large smile and nursing the remains of a measure of the fire whiskey, one of the few wizarding beverages the Goblin had acquired a taste for over the years. The ultimate authority in Gringotts was also the Goblin High Council and they had voted, albeit narrowly, to share certain specific information with Griphook, when promoted.

The goblin had done outstandingly as far as the council was concerned. The business with the basilisk had earned the bank a fortune and the Quibbler's articles and the pictures of Harry in action sporting the goblin crest had initiated an upsurge in business.

Indirectly, there had been improvements in Goblin Wizard relations for the first time since the end of the first war.

Igor Karkaroff had left the ball immediately after the opening waltz. He sat alone on his vessel surrounded by broken glasses, gulping fire whiskey straight from the bottle. Britain did not make or even import a decent brand of vodka, and he had drunk his way through the two crates he had brought with him. But then again, how many people could claim to have been dragged to the feet of the Dark Lord, subjected to the Cruciatus Curse for a number of minutes before being given a task that would make him the most hunted wizard in Britain if he succeeded or get him killed? Only a few months left to live, he as he drained the bottle and hurled it against the wall. It shattered, mirroring the life he had tried to rebuild. Damned if he did, damned if he did not....

Igor reached for another bottle.

Chapter 12

Mysteries and Assistance

The tournament's judges were all fully aware of the Golden Egg and the clue that it contained for one reason: They were all a part of the organizing committee. Even Griphook, a late comer to the panel, was privy to it. While the members of the committee had a say, it had always been the hosting school and its headmaster that had final say on any matter of the tournament unless unanimously opposed. The amendment to the rules was necessary after the rampaging cockatrice of the 1792 incarnation of the Tournament.

And considering that cheating always has been and in all likelihood always would be a part of the Triwizard Tournament, Igor Karkaroff made sure that Victor received a clue about listening under water via a Hogwarts owl. Madame Maxine simply let a piece of clearly labeled parchment where Gabrielle Delacour could find it. The young witch had passed it to her sister almost immediately. Griphook's own innate sense of honor meant that the goblin would cut off his sword arm than give Harry any assistance in solving the clue for the second task. The Hogwarts headmaster had not given Cedric any aid in solving the clue to the second task – partly out of a need to play by the rules, but mostly because he knew that whatever aid Cedric received, Harry would get. As it was, Harry had done outstandingly well against his Hungarian Horntail instead of a more sedate Japanese Long-snout. However, the two champions who received anonymous assistance had not hesitated to verify, and then share their clues with each other:

"Come seek us where our voices sound,

We cannot sing above the ground,

And while you're searching, ponder this:

We've taken what you'll sorely miss,

An hour long you'll have to look,

And to recover what we took,

But past an hour- the prospect's black,

Too late, it's gone, it won't come back"

With the lyrics in hand, the task was clear: Retrieve something they valued from the depths of the black lake within an hour, or lose it forever. Therefore, the question was what thing the organizers could take.

"Perhaps," suggested Hermione slowly, "It's not a thing, like a broom. What if they take a person?" If that were the case, it was clear to Harry exactly what they would take. Instinctively, he pulled Hermione close to him. She smiled slightly as her boyfriend was not even aware of what he was doing. Victor noted both their reactions and raised an eyebrow towards Hermione in a deadpan fashion. The witch was barely able to stifle a giggle. The Quidditch star wondered whether Harry had actually said those three all-important words to his girlfriend yet, and mentally shrugged. It was none of his business, but he was curious.

Fleur immediately blanched Gabrielle!

Unfortunately, that premise left Cedric and Victor scratching their heads. However, for the moment, they were wondering about how they would be able to breathe underwater for an hour. The bubblehead charm was the obvious solution, but there would no doubt be various other barriers and obstacles in the way. The charm was also just a bubble, easily popped that would leave the Champion in question more than a little defenseless under water, "Small wonder," said Cedric, "that champions have died in this thing..."

Surprisingly, Neville Longbottom managed to supply the answer, "Gillyweed," he said. The stares of four champions was a little unnerving but he ploughed ahead, "The plant will allow you to breathe underwater for about an hour... the length of the effect varies depending on a number of different factors including your age, weight, whether its fresh or salt water and the quality of the plant." Bubblehead charms and Gillyweed were the solutions to their 24th of February problem.

However, of great worry to Harry, and Colin, was the 14th of February: A day that many men dread, uncertain of what to buy beyond flowers and chocolates and a dinner date. It was also a

Saturday, and a Hogsmeade weekend as well. Harry wanted to make the day special, but romance was still – at least for him – a mystery in its own right.

The men of the residence with girlfriends gathered, almost in secret to brainstorm plans and ideas. Colin felt that his best course of action was to let things develop of their own accord and went with the traditional Valentines: Flowers, chocolates, a date in Hogsmeade and a small gift. Cedric stole a page from Harry's book, going with a moonlight dinner. Victor jokingly wondered if it was too late to find a date, to his every lasting regret as Ginny started naming names. Before long, everyone was in on the joke and Viktor had a list of sixty girls. Harry however, was at a loss, and Griphook refused to help, "Apologizing to a witch is one thing. But one cannot romance a witch in the manner one romances a...woman of my species."

Dog father Sirius in his own words, "Twelve years in Azkaban and I've forgotten what it's like to go out on a date... but come to think of it," Harry could almost see the roughish grin and wink, "I never was the dating kind. But you can't go far wrong with flowers or chocolates – not both! That's overdoing it! A nice simple date is perfect for your first Valentines together. Get out there, spend the day with your girl and forget about the bloody tournament!" That cinched it.

Hermione awoke that Saturday to find her room in the residence filled with red, long stem roses and her bed covered in red rose petals. She smiled as she slipped out of bed and changed her clothes before going out to meet her boyfriend.

Harry was sitting waiting for her in the living room, and his face broke out in a huge grin as she came in. They came together and, her hands wound their way into his hair, holding him tightly to her. When they finally pulled back, he trailed his nose along her cheek, "Happy Valentine's Day, love." The way that he whispered it sent tingles down her spine. Workout attire, it seemed, hid very little and left little to the imagination.

Hermione had read a little too much for her own good, she knew exactly what she wanted him to do to her. However, she hesitated, even though common sense was rapidly loose to passion and desire as he trailed kisses along her cheek and down the side of her neck,

in a fashion that was more than suggestive. "Either you stop or I am going to tear your clothes off!" she growled.

All good relationships involve trust, loyalty and to a lesser extent, the ability to compromise. Suffice to say that the compromise left both of them flushed and out of breath, leaving a trail of clothes from the door of his room to the edge of the bed. The instinctive bond was their guide and though practically naked beneath the sheets and sated, they were not necessarily satisfied. At least Hermione was not, "You know," said Harry with a slightly dreamy tone, "that was not the morning workout I had planned."

Snuggled against him, "Well, if you want, we can still go for our morning run," she sat up, and with a wave of her wand, had her clothes in a pile on the bed. She stood and Harry took a moment to enjoy the view, and sighed wistfully as she pulled on her shirt and pants, "And Harry," she said staring on him over her shoulder, "If you can catch me," she had the look of something or other he could not quite place, "You can have me." That definitely got his attention.

He shrugged, "I'd rather just lie here and enjoy the view."

Wand in hand she grinned, "Guess you need a little incentive to... play..." a wave of her wand conjured a bucket and Harry's eyes widened as he tried to scramble clear. Coiled up in the blanket however, there was no escape as two gallons of ice-cold water drenched him, the blanket, bed and pillows.

Harry was dressed and out the door wand in hand, half wet and in pursuit. He could hear her feet pounding the flagstones as she made her way through the castle, with him hot on her heels. She teased him, slowing down by the front door. He cast a fire hose charm in her direction but she nimbly sidestepped the stream of water and took off at a full sprint with a laugh. "Hermione Jane Granger!" he hollered after her, "I'm gonna get you!"

Back in the residence, Winky emerged from Harry's cupboard with a sigh of relief. She had been cleaning inside the cupboard when Master Harry and Ms. Granger had... stumbled in rather passionately. The pop of apparition would have given her away so she had stayed in the cupboard and done her best to cover her ears with silencing and muffling charms. Though there was now an extra bed to clean, she did not mind. Winky just shook her head, "Winky is

not a bad house elf. Winky is a good house elf. Winky will keep master's secrets," she mumbled.

The couple had exhausted themselves and had curled up at the base of a largish oak tree. It had taken a few drying charms before they were fully dry, content to be with each other, "Love you Harry." She whispered. Harry simply smiled and kissed her. He was not too sure whether that actually described what he was feeling. The concept was more than slightly alien to him. Nevertheless, Sirius was right, he realized, this was their day... tournament be damned.

Hermione had expected a trip to Hogsmeade. Instead, Dobby popped in and popped out, leaving a picnic basket with enough food to feed an army. It was exactly what Sirius suggested and perhaps exactly what the couple needed. They knew each other, almost intimately – no surprise considering what they had been through together. When Hermione thought about it, the key moments in her friendship with Harry had happened when Ron was out cold – after the chess set knocked him out in their first year, and the time turner from the previous year.

Harry was perfectly content with his relationship with his girlfriend, but was not sure if there was something more he could do to make the relationship, better. He knew she was waiting for something, something from him, but he just was not sure what. He was not sure that he could really put in to words how she made him feel. He did not even know whether, whatever it was, had a name, but he just knew, instinctively that something this good, could not be a bad thing.

It was late afternoon when both of them finally retreated to the residence. When Harry suggested going for a swim, she thought he meant the black lake, "I was thinking more the Jacuzzi..."

Hermione had been wondering about how far she could push Harry, he hadn't said it, but then, considering what she knew about his life with the Dursleys, and what Ron had also shared, back when they were friends... it was no surprise to her that love, and exactly what that meant were strange otherworldly ideas to him. Harry had a great capacity to love; she had seen that, experienced it firsthand. She had seen it in the way he cared for others, in the choices he made, had already made. However, how to get him to understand that he deserved what he gave so, easily, so willingly to others.

Harry needed to... experience love. She reached in to the bottom drawer of her cupboard.

When Madam Malkin had come to outfit them for the Yule Ball, she had managed to sneak a private word with her and had arranged for certain, clothing items. She had her hand on the bag, and wondered whether now was the right time. Especially since, it was what she wanted. She put the bag back in its drawer. Soon, she decided. Give him a little more time; he will work it out for himself and that would be the right time.

They couple weren't the only one to think of the Jacuzzi, but fortunately, Luna and Colin weren't doing anything more than enjoying Butterbeer and each other's company. As it was, by six in the evening, there was something of party in the making with almost twenty people laughing, and just having a relaxed good time. Harry looked around the room, and wondered at his good fortune: Luna and Colin, the twins, Ginny and Neville, three other champions. Who was Victor talking to? The girl seemed familiar but he could not really place her. Not that it mattered as Gred and Forge cannonballed their way in, soaking everyone with a tidal wave, "Bathtub Tidal Wave!" shouted Fred exuberantly, he clambered out of the Jacuzzi, "Five Sickles each!"

"Potter's Bathtub Tidal Wave Maker Cleaner," shouted Harry with his wand aimed, "On the house!" he summoned Fred back in to the water. There was a moment stunned silence as Fred emerged spluttering, and returned fire with a wave of water. Pandemonium ensued as a water war broke out. Harry grinned as he grabbed his girlfriend around the waist and cast a disillusionment charm over both of them. Let the others have the battle. Harry was more interested in winning the war.

Nobody noticed that the "host and hostess" had vanished.

The time between Valentine's Day and the second task passed quickly. Albus Dumbledore, upon reflection, would come to realize that his choices would have next to no influence upon who Harry called friend, confidant or foe. Hindsight as has often been said is perfect. Dumbledore had collected his hostages on the evening of the 23rd as he relaxed by the fire in his office.

Harry however, had his house elves monitoring the Marauder's Map and Dobby reported the odd congregation in the Hospital Wing. A few discrete enquiries confirmed that nobody in the school seemed to know where three Hogwarts and one Beauxbaton student had vanished too. Enquiries to professors, heads of houses and even prefects met with vague, general reassurances that they were safe and were doing just fine. Nobody had any doubts. Hermione had been right all along: They were taking people. It was not something that had to be recovered, but someone to be rescued.

"So much drama," growled Fleur. She was practically vibrating with rage at the liberties taken with Gabrielle. Shaking her head at the situation, she stomped to the dueling area of the residence, where the training dummies were located. The French half Veela blasted her way through half a dozen in a little under half an hour, ramping up the difficulty with each successive dummy she defeated until she had destroyed the seventh using a blend of fire and air magic that is innate to Veela, her wand forgotten on the floor where she'd dropped it.

Harry recalled the temper the Veela at the World Cup had shown, and knew that he would have to tread cautiously, until she calmed down, "Fleur, rescuing Gabrielle is our priority." The other three champions nodded in agreement, "The hostages can't come to any real harm. If they did, Dumbledore would get the axe."

"And if they do?" her tone had a cold, brittle quality, "then what?"

Harry shrugged, "I help you hex Dumbledore." He was calm, incredibly calm in the face of the angry Veela. He silently thanked Vernon Dursely for that, "Now how to distract whoever the old man has guarding the hospital wing...."

There was a knock at the door and one of the goblins entered, kneeling before Harry, and "Zha-las ghuliah-nar Ursh-Kai Potter, "Harry nodded," Two of the castle ghosts wish to speak to you, your orders?"

The castle was host to as many as a hundred different ghosts, but only twenty or thirty had any real regular contact with the students. The two ghosts standing – or rather floating before the gathered Champions and students were perhaps something of an odd couple: Sir Nicholas of Gryffindor and the Bloody Baron of Slytherin, "We

come at the behest of the Lady of the Castle," said Nick, "with a message."

The baron sounded a great deal like Victor when he was dealing with members of an opposing Quidditch team, "The Lady has instructed us to cause distractions at the ninth hour of this night to grant you access to the Hogwarts infirmary, and the hostages for the second task of the tournament."

"I thought we were supposed to rescue them tomorrow?" asked Cedric.

"Yes, you are," confirmed Nick, "But the Lady suggests that given the friendships between the champions, that Headmaster Dumbledore will probably complicate the task in some fashion. Perhaps, certain charms could be of use..." The ghosts departed Harry glanced at Hermione and she nodded towards Cedric.

The byplay was not lost on the others, "Cedric, can you cast a tracking charm?" He nodded. Dobby appeared with a sudden pop, placed the marauder's map and his invisibility cloak on the table and with a grin to Harry disappeared. "I need to give that elf a raise," said Harry with smile, "The ghosts will draw the guards out. Cedric, get in there and cast the tracking charm. I'll hang around under the cloak, just in case."

Fleur and Victor both protested but Harry was a step ahead, "Neither of you know your way around the castle. Cedric is a Prefect – he can be out of bed, doing a prefect patrol or something, and if it comes to it, he can catch me, providing a cover of sorts." He glanced at his watch, 'Exploding Snap anyone?'

Two games later, Harry was nursing slightly red fingers as Luna had always managed to place her cards down without setting off the pile. Harry, next in the rotation invariable got snapped. Cedric and Harry were in place a few minutes before the appointed hour. Dumbledore had not been playing around as Professors Snape and Flitwick guarded the door. At precisely nine, there was a crash of metal, followed by another, then a third and a fourth. Flitwick was off like a shot down the corridor, wand drawn. Resident poltergeist and quite possibly the resident evil of the castle appeared, coming up through the floor, floating through Professor Snape. He cursed as he leapt

clear of the cackling fiend with a roar that did little to drown out the shrieked singing of Peeves as Snape raised his wand.

The poltergeist nimbly floated aside and hurled a piece of armor at Snape, continuing to sing all the while about a rotten student from house of snakes, wriggling and sniveling underfoot. Harry wished he had time to listen and memorize the original and impressive insults that Peeves continued to rain down on the irate potions master as banishment spells flew from his wand.

The lock on the door would have opened to a simple "Alohamora." The wards were a problem, neither of them had anticipated. Suddenly, the wards vanished. No explanation, not a sound, nothing. It just disappeared. The Gryffindor ghost rose through the floor, with an urgent wave, "The Lady bids you to hurry! The Friar is running out of armored suits to knock over, and Peeves is likewise running low on munitions!"

Harry shook his head as he made a note of the hostages. Cho and Ron made a certain kind of twisted sense from the convoluted headmaster's standpoint. Gabrielle was an obvious choice. However, the fourth hostage was Siobhan Greene. As far as he knew, none of the champion knew the Hufflepuff 5th year. There was a brief glow around each hostage as Cedric cast the spell. They were out of the infirmary when Sir Nicholas locked the door and the wards sprang back in to place as Professor Flitwick was coming up the corridor. Harry vanished under the invisibility cloak and Cedric, who had his wand out was just able to mutter, "Residence. Go!"

Harry slinked off as a shadow down the corridor in the opposite direction as Cedric moved to meet the Ravenclaw head of house, "Professor," greeted Cedric cautiously.

"Is everything alright Mr. Diggory?" asked Professor Flitwick.

"I don't know, sir." He replied, "There was a lot of banging and noise a few minutes ago... heard it all from near the library."

"And what," oiled Snape, "where you doing out of bed, at this hour, wandering around the castle?"

Cedric, to his credit met the potion master's gaze without flinching, "Prefect patrol professor."

"But the normal patrol route of the prefects does not normally encompass the hospital wing," said Snape in the same oily tone.

"As I was just telling Professor Flitwick, I heard a noise – lots of noise. Almost as if somebody was knocking over those suits of armor – or at least, trying to knock them all over," In the shadows of night, it seemed like a reasonable explanation but Snape was not convinced. But then again, considering that the wards upon the infirmary were intact, and no student would be able to breach the wards set by the headmaster himself, and that Professor Flitwick would not support any further detainment of a Triwizard Champion.... Snape sighed inwardly and dismissed the nosey prefect as exactly that: A nosey prefect.

Peeves floated suddenly out of the wall – or at any rate, his arm did as he rammed an arm through Snape midsection, "Upset stomach oh greasy one?" The poltergeist cackled as it zoomed up the corridor, "The Lady of the Castle call to me! I'll answer though she'll never date me! After all, the Lady stands in the Light! And if a greasy git get smeared in the fight..."

Snape snarled much to Flitwick's amusement as Cedric turned, partly to leave and partly to hide his own smirk when the charms professor grabbed his arm, "Yes professor?"

"Tell Mr. Potter," Flitwick whispered conspiratorially, "Ten points to Gryffindor for finding a way past the headmaster's wards. And ten points to Hufflepuff for loyalty!" Leaving Cedric dumbfounded for a moment the charms professor smiled and left. Cedric shook his head. At this rate, Champion Potter would have the support of most of the staff before the end of the school year. He shook his head and made his way back to the residence.

He arrived perhaps five minutes after Harry, who was busy filling in the others on what they had found in the infirmary, when he revealed the identity of the fourth hostage, Siobhan Green. The temperature rose as Victor took a turn at the training dummies, obliterating one after the other with a selection of curses that walked the fine line between light and dark, cursing rather creatively under his breath as he did so. Harry looked at Cedric and Fleur, "Was it something I said?"

Cedric had a dark grin of his own, "You didn't know?"

"Know what?"

"You really didn't know?" echoed Fleur. There was a hint of incredulity in her voice,

"How could you not see it?" emphasized his girlfriend.

"See what?" asked Harry slightly frustrated. It took a moment and a look from Hermione before he figured out what the others were referring to, "Victor and Siobhan? No. I didn't see it." The girls giggled and Harry sighed, "I'll never understand women," that set off another fit of giggles forcing Harry to turn to Cedric, "How do you cope with that?"

"You mean the giggling?" queried Cedric, "You just, kinda do." There was the sound of an express train smashing through a wall, accompanied by a yell. Moments later, Victor stomped in to the room, exuding an aura of anger, "What right does your headmaster have to take students hostage!" he thundered.

Harry eyed the raging Bulgarian critically, and met the man's gaze. Emerald green met black and for a moment, it seemed like the two would trade blows. Smart money was on a draw with two occupied beds in the hospital wing, "As a headmaster, none. His authority stems from his position as principal organizer of the tournament." But if it's any consolation Victor, I'll help you rescue Siobhan, after I help rescue Gabrielle." Harry stood his ground, "I didn't know that you two were close..." Suddenly, he remembered where he had seen her: The Yule Ball. She was the only girl outside their group that Victor had danced with during the evening, "How long have you two been dating?"

"We're not," shrugged Victor, "Her parents and mine are old friends. I have known her for many years. Do I care about her? Yes. But I am not romantically in love with her." Victor shrugged, "You said that you would help hex the headmaster if he harmed one hair on Gabrielle's head. Would you expect me to do any less for my friends?" Harry shook his head, "Then you understand," said Victor quietly as he turned to face Fleur, "I cannot help rescue your sister over Siobhan."

Fleur shook her head, "I... understand, the choice you make. But I do not like," she sighed, "I would choose Gabrielle over any other hostage in a heartbeat." A measure of understanding and respect passed between the two Champions, and Harry was glad that nobody was blowing anybody up tonight. He was not sure but he thought that Dobby and Winky were a little miffed with the amount of clearing up after the impromptu Valentine's party.

The words of the ghosts kept him up, instead of nerves or worry about the second task. Just what did they mean by "Lady of the Castle?" and since when did Peeves listen to anyone besides the Bloody Baron or the current Headmaster of Hogwarts anyway? Cedric was adamant that Peeves had been signing about answering the call of the Lady. Who could that possibly be? Rowena Ravenclaw? His mind weighed down by that question alone, sleep was a long time coming for Harry, even as he protectively curled himself around his girlfriend. He slept best next to her and hoped that the same was true for her. He kissed her gently on the forehead, closed his eyes, and finally let himself drift off to sleep.

The morning of February 24, dawned dark and cloudy. It looked and felt like rain to the Champions as they gathered on the banks of the Black Lake. The stands erected for the second task were already packed. Dumbledore raised his eyebrows in question at Colin and Luna who smiled politely, produced Quibbler press credentials, and more importantly parental permission letters. He nodded to them.

Harry stole a glance and noted that both Karkaroff and Madame Maxime did not look at all pleased to see him... It was obvious from the looks on their faces that they had thought he was not going to turn up. The headmaster nodded. Bagman cast a sonorous charm and turned to address the crowds, "Welcome Ladies and Gentlemen, to the second task of the 1994 Triwizard Tournament!"

He kept his introductory spiel short and to the point, repeating the clue the clue for the benefit of the audience that whispered and mumbled to each other, wondering what each champion would have to recover. "The hostages at the bottom of the lake await rescue by our champions are: Ronald Weaseley by Champion Potter of Gringotts, Cho Chang by Champion Diggory of Hogwarts, Gabrielle Delacour by Champion Delacour of Beauxbatons, and Siobhan Green by Champion Krum of Durmstrang." The headmaster's broad smile failed to break the ice with the gathered champions, "The

hostages have been scattered throughout the village of the Merpeople at the bottom of the Black Lake."

That complicated things no end. With the hostages scattered, they could no longer work together. There was no way around that. The headmaster it seemed still had a few tricks left up his sleeve. The champions glanced at each other and realized they were going to have to play it the headmaster's way, "Anyone in distress, red flare" said Harry.

"Success is a gold flare," finished Fleur. Victor nodded.

"Four gold flashes and we're all safe and dry," said Cedric, "Luck."

The champions were glowering at the headmaster. It was clear that the headmaster still had hoped for the past. Harry thought about it and shook his head. Things were changing and the beloved headmaster had his head buried too far in the sand to see it, let alone accept it. Cedric was about to tell Dumbledore where he could shove his choice of hostage when Fleur reigned him in simply by gently taking his hand. He calmed, and offered her a slightly sheepish grin. For the moment at least, Dumbledore would keep his hat and beard.

"But past an hour – the prospect's black. Too late, it's gone, it won't come back," said Harry to himself. He shook his head, hoping it was all dramatic hyperbole. He turned to the other three champions, "Right. Let's get this over with!"

Chapter 13

The second task

The stands normally around the Quidditch pitch were arrayed along the banks of the lake and they were as packed now as they had been during the first task in November. For the first time, Harry realized just how high the stands were as the mirror-like surface of the lake projected hundreds of reflections. The excited babble of the crowd had resumed after Dumbledore's announcement. The judges were seated around another gold draped table on the water's edge. To Harry complete lack of surprise, Mr. Crouch who had been ill during the first task was missing and Umbridge was occupying his place and delighted in giving Harry what he assumed to be a special look of loathing reserved just for him.

Ludo Bagman pointed his wand at his throat and said "Sonorus!" his voice boomed across the lake towards the stands, "Our four champions are ready, and will have one hour to recover what has been taken from them. From the count! Three, Two, One!" the whistle echoed shrilly in the cold air coming off the lake and the stands erupted with cheers as the champions, spread out in a rough line three meters from each made to the water's edge. Harry was again clad in Basilisk hide armor, but had eschewed the cloak for this task. He had decided before hand to go with the Gillyweed, and cast the bubblehead charm only if it was necessary. However, if that became necessary, he would have failed the task.

He stuffed the rubbery plant in to his mouth, chewing what felt like slimy rat rails or octopus tentacles. The water was cold but the armor's own warming charms negated most of the cold on his feet and hands. They were going to go numb, very soon he realized. He cast his eyes ones over the stands, ignoring the laughter, jeering and cats calls from the Slytherins.

He had read up on the effects of Gillyweed and when it suddenly felt like an invisible pillow had been clamped over his face, he took a last breath, exhaled all the air from his lungs. There was a piercing pain in the sides of his neck, just above the gorget of the armor. He dived. He took his first breath underwater and felt it pass smoothly through his gills, sending oxygen racing through his body. His hands were webbed, and a quick glance down confirmed that his feet looked more like flippers.

The water felt light and cool and he struck out with hands and feet, gliding through the water like a missile. He no longer needed to blink as he swam out towards the center of the lake and drew his wand. An incantation later, the small glowing ball of light on the end of his wand, leapt from his wand and he followed the wisp, however unwillingly towards Ronald Weasley.

It was a surreal, almost dreamlike experience as he swam over the strange landscape. He could only see about ten feet around him, and kept his wand at the ready as he sped through different watery scenes like a picture book. The shadows of the water were gray-lit and small silver fish flickered past him like silver darts. Where were the other champions? He wondered as something... large moved ahead. Hopefully, that was a log, and not the Giant Squid.

Light green weed stretched as far as he could see, like an overgrown lawn when a second wisp crossed paths with his own. Where his was a reddish color, this one was a deep blue that bordered on purple. He looked to his left: Victor. The Bulgarian seeker waved once to Harry. Well, that was the big thing moving around.

Victor had eschewed both Gillyweed and the bubblehead charm in favor of some kind of partial human transfiguration. Part shark, Harry realized as the champion cut across him, no doubt towards Siobhan. He wished Victor the best of luck, as the pair parted ways. So where were Fleur and Cedric? From within the weeds, something grabbed on to his ankle.

Twisting round, Harry found a Grindylow. A small horned water demon with its long fingers coiled tight around his ankle. He pointed his wand as another pair grabbed on to his other foot, "Stupefy! Stupefy! Relashio!" three large bubbles erupted from his mouth, no sound but the pair of stunners found their mark and instead of sparks, Harry's spell boiled the water and sent a jet of it, in an every widening cone that burned the deep green skin of the water demon an angry splotchy red.

It floated away slightly cross-eyed as others crawled out of their burrows and poked their heads up. Harry did not waste any time, turning full circles in the water as he blazed a clear path and followed the homing wisp. The pressure of the water on his

eardrums increased as he went deeper, something told him he was almost fifty feet under water as he rounded an outcropping of rock and found Fleur in a fight for her life.

The Grindylows had opted to attack from three sides at once and had almost overwhelmed the Witch. Harry suddenly recalled something he had read in one of the many extra tomes and books lying around the residence: Veela are magical creatures of earth and air. Water would therefore weaken her significantly. The Beauxbaton Champion had been at a severe disadvantage from the start of this task! Harry waded in, his movements rendered slow and sluggish underwater, his spells seemed to be somewhat underpowered as a wave of stunners, banishing charms and a cone of boiling water burned away the attacker on one side. Fleur screamed in rage and the sound seemed to strike something, primal within him as he almost bolted. The Grindylows did not hang about, many of them making a desperate bid towards open water, away from the Veela as she hurled raw elemental power after them, cutting down swatches of the small water demons like grass.

The water took on a brackish hue as blood permeate around the pair, but the fight had gone out of the Grindylows very quickly and the pair of champions were standing alone, surrounded by butchered and blasted corpses in every direction for several meters. Fleur still had a slightly wild look in her eyes as she swam forwards, ignoring the carnage around her, ignoring even Harry as she swam out.

There was suddenly no time, no way to even shout a warning as one of the water demons leapt out and smashed directly in to Fleur's. The claws popped the buddle as it grabbed on to the base of her neck, trying its level best to throttle the life out of her. Even with his webbed feet and hands, Harry would not be able to swim over fast enough. "Diffindo!" If Fleur had jerked, or even moved, it would have ended badly but the curse severed the demon's arms, one just below the elbow, and the other about half way down its forearm. It snarled as it struggled to propel itself clear. Harry obliged the ugly creature with a swift kick to the head that sent it spinning in to a mud bank.

He recast the charm over the Beauxbaton champion but realized that she was unconscious. He could do precious little for her so far underwater. Reaching in to a pouch on his hip, he looped the goblin medallion around her neck. On the back, was a small dial that he

twisted and then pushed clear of the floating witch. He prayed it would be enough as the emergency portkey transported her to the surface. He had a choice: Ron or Gabrielle. It was not a hard choice and if it got him disqualified so much the better. He recalled the wisp to his wand and cast a new one.

From the far side of the lake, the direction Victor had gone in was a golden flash, almost invisible in the water. It was good news: Victor had secured his hostage and was making his way to the surface. That left him, and Cedric. He did not have a watch and cursed quietly... no way to tell how much time he had left.

He pushed on, for what felt like at least another twenty minutes, passing over a vast mud bank that swirled murkily around him as he moved through the water until finally, he heard the snatch of haunting mer-song,

"An hour long you'll have to look,

And to recover what we took..."

He picked up speed, rounding a large rock that had painted pictures of merpeople using spears to drive off what might have been a not to scale representation of the Giant Squid. He followed the song deeper in,

"... your time's half gone, so tarry not

Lest what you seek stays here to rot..."

Algae stained, crude stone dwellings loomed out of the gloom. There were dark glassless windows and faces in almost every single one. None looked like the mermaids he had read about, ever. They were grayish skinned with long wild weed green hair. They had broken teeth, yellowed, matching their eyes and they leered at him as he swam past, many more emerging from caves and dwellings to stare at him. A small group followed him, about ten feet behind, silver spears in their hands. Harry sped around a corner and found himself in what he supposed was the village square. Somewhere in the distance behind him, there was a gold flash. It played across the faces of the gathered merfolk for a moment.

At the center of the square was a statue of a giant merman or woman, and Gabrielle Delacour was bound to the statue, hanging by a length of rope for the tip of the statue's tail. He swam forwards, half expecting them to lower their spears and charge but they did not, content to just watch. The moment he tried to cut Gabrielle free of the thick slimy rope, two dragged him back, and several more formed a menacing half circle facing him, "She is not your hostage. The boy is not far. Go. Save your hostage. Leave this one for her champion."

Harry shook his head, "She is a child. She is the youngest hostage. Her champion has been defeated by Grindylows." Even though he spoke normally, only a stream of bubbles emerged from his mouth, it was clear that the mer-chieftain understood everything he was saying. "I made a promise to rescue her. I will keep that promise." Slowly, deliberately, Harry drew his wand. Without a watch, he did not have time to negotiate, "I will give you to the count of three. One!" the merfolk stopped singing and laughing and could only stare in disbelief as the sole wizard prepared to face down half the village.

"Two!" Several of their warriors leveled spears in Harry's direction. The rest scattered in to their homes. Outmatched perhaps, he watched calmly as the mer-chieftain drew a pair of curved scimitar like swords. He aimed his wand at the warrior on his left.

"Three!" The bubble leapt from his mouth. Magic channeled down his wand and the first stunner leapt from the wand tip toward and smashed in to the warrior on the right. The unconscious form flew back several meters and then settled on the lake bottom, his spear settling next to him gently.

The moment of surprise passed and Harry had pushed off the ground with both feet. Suspended in the water he waved his wand in a complicated fashion, creating half dozen mirror images of himself. The illusions were temporary and would dissipate within a minute given the shifting of the water. He needed less time than that, "Diffindo!" A pair of blasting hexes threw up a massive cloud of mud and sand that obscured – he hoped – everyone's vision for a few moments, "Accio Gabrielle's rope!" The summoning charm is to summon an object to the hand of the caster or his immediate vicinity.

The charm summoned the ropes that bound Gabrielle, but also the bound nine-year-old witch in to his outstretched left hand as he rose

above the village. He was only able to use his feet to propel the two of them to the surface as he kept his wand at the ready. A detached part of his mind noticed the merfolk shadowing him at a distance. He knew that if they did decide to make an issue of him taking Gabrielle, he would be in no position to stop them. I hope that they just kill me, and not eat me, a part of his brain muttered darkly.

His shoulders were aching and his muscles screamed in protest. He realized that his brain was feeling...waterlogged. The surface was at least twenty feet overhead. He kept kicking, doing his best to resist the urge to breathe. That urge would kill him unless he broke the surface first.

The flippers were gone; all he had left were his feet. The gills would go next he realized. He debated pausing for an instant to cast the bubblehead charm but one of the merfolk flirted across his path. There was a pain in the side of his neck, water in his mouth and his lungs screamed for air as he continued to push upwards.

He broke the surface of the lake, clear air, cold, crisp made his face sting as he gulped for breath. All around him, wild, green-haired heads were emerging out of the water with him, but they were smiling at him and when the boat pulled alongside, they helped push the pair aboard before diving beneath the surface once more. Siobhan was wrapped in a towel, cradling a mug of hot chocolate in her hand, Victor whispering something quietly in to her ear. Cedric was sitting as far as possible from a shivering Cho Chang. Madame Pomfrey was pouring out several measures of pepper up potion and Harry sank wearily on to the deck, "Somebody, check Gabrielle over," he said. They would have a few minutes of peace before they reached the lakeside and would have to face the judges with their hostages – or in Harry's case, a lack of one.

The crowd in the stand were making more than enough noise to give Harry the beginnings of a nasty headache. However, he did not care what the spectators thought; he didn't really care what the judges had thought. He may not have played by the rules of the tournament, but the more he thought about it, the more he concluded that he had found a loophole that would allow him to skate through. If it did not - he shrugged indifferently - at least the tournament would be over for him. He just wished he'd get a minute with Hermione without everyone rubbernecking even as Madam Pomfrey continued fussing over all of them, champion and hostage alike. All were wrapped in

thick blankets except for Harry, who had refused one. The basilisk armor had kept him warm and apart from his hands, feet and head perfectly dry.

The headmaster stood beaming on the bank of the lake with the rest of the judges a short way off. Madame Maxine was having a tricky time restraining Fleur Delacour, who was doing her best to squelch her rage even as she continued to argue with her headmistress in French, no doubt fighting tooth and nail to return to the water. The boat docked and Harry was the first off, carrying Gabrielle in his arms.

"Gabrielle! Gabrielle! Is she alive? Is she hurt?"

"She's fine..." Harry told her, at least, he thought he did but he was so exhausted he could hardly talk, as he handed the nine-year-old over to her older sister. "It was the Grindylows... they attacked me... oh Gabrielle, I thought... I thought..."

Hermione just hugged him, held him and kissed him gently. He smiled, enjoying the sound of her voice, tuning out the crowd, the judges, everyone and everything else, "You're well outside the time limit, Harry... Did it take you ages to find them?"

"Not, exactly..." he launched in to his story, quietly, and though he was not aware that he had the attention of the other champions, as he explained Fleur's battle with the Grindylows, and the choice he made, "If it gets me disqualified, it gets me disqualified," he shrugged.

Dumbledore was crouching at the water's edge, deep in conversation with what seemed to be the chief of the merfolk, a particularly wild and ferocious-looking male with his swords sheathed upon his back. The headmaster was making the same sort of screechy noises that the merpeople made when they were above water; clearly, Dumbledore could speak Mermish. Finally, he straightened up and walked up to the gathered champions, "Harry, the spectators would like to know," the headmasters' eyes were twinkling as he spoke with a magically enhanced voice, "Perhaps you can explain why you rescued Gabrielle, instead of your best friend?"

Harry took a breath, trying to ignore the sheer stupidity of the question, and failed. "Headmaster Dumbledore," Harry said quietly, "Whether or not Ron is my best friend, friend," he glanced apologetically at the twins and Ginny, standing close by, "acquaintance, or enemy, is none of your concern. I presume the relevant question is why I chose to rescue a different hostage?"

The headmaster nodded cautiously, wondering where exactly Harry was leading him, and his jaw locked with tension. He paused partly for dramatic effect, partly to cast a sonorous charm on himself as he directed his answer to the crowds in the stands, "The clue for the second task stated clearly: "We've taken what you'd sorely miss... but past an hour the prospect's black. Too late, it's gone, it won't come back."" Murmurs spread through the gathered onlookers, the judges, his retinue, and even Fleur was curious where he was going with this. He spoke with a self-assured confidence, his tone making it clear he was positive that he had done nothing wrong, "When Ms. Delacour was incapacitated at the bottom of the lake, I was given a choice, to choose what I would miss more. I chose to rescue that which I missed, that which I never had, that which was taken from me the first 11 years of my life." His voice was lighthearted, "I knew I would miss childhood innocence and the happy memories of growing up," his voice turned so cold, the smoke of dry ice would have been warmer, "More than bigoted, fair-weather friends."

That shut everyone up. The crowd stared in silence. They were shocked that anyone would dare take such a tone with the headmaster. What nearly none heard was the accusation and verbal slap to Dumbledore. Harry hated the fact that people thought they knew what he was thinking, that they knew everything about him because of a couple of newspaper articles and some photos.

"A conference before we give the marks, I think." It was all the headmaster could say. Harry shrugged, indifferent and turned to check on his friends. Fleur had many cuts on her face and arms and her robes were torn, but she did not seem to care, nor would she allow Madam Pomfrey to clean them.

"Look after Gabrielle," she told her, and then she turned to Harry. "You saved her," she said breathlessly. "Even though she was not your hostage." Fleur bent down, kissed Harry twice on each cheek. Hermione simply shrugged. Gabrielle looked on in amazement. Something here brooked looking in to, as far as the nine year old

was concerned. After all, whenever her older sister ever kissed a boy, he became a pile of pudding. Not this man... not her champion.

Ludo Bagman's magically magnified voice boomed out beside them, making them all jump, and causing the crowd in the stands to go very quiet. "Ladies and gentlemen, we have reached our decision. Mer-chieftain Murcus has told us exactly what happened at the bottom of the lake, and we have therefore decided to award marks out of fifty for each of the champions, as follows: Champion Delacour of Beauxbatons demonstrated excellent use of the Bubble-Head Charm. Unfortunately, she was attacked by Grindylows, and failed to retrieve her hostage. We award her twenty-five points."

Applause from the stands was polite, "I deserved zero," said Fleur throatily, shaking her magnificent head.

"Champion Diggory of Hogwarts, who also used the Bubble-Head Charm, was first to return with his hostage, though he returned one minute outside the time limit of an hour." Enormous cheers from the Hufflepuffs in the crowd; Harry saw Cho give Cedric a look of jealous longing. She still had feelings for him, even though Cedric was too busy, comforting Fleur with, he noted with a smile, Gabrielle sitting on his knee, "We therefore award him forty-seven points. Champion Krum of Durmstrang used an incomplete form of Transfiguration, which was nevertheless effective, and was second to return with his hostage. We award him forty points." Karkaroff clapped particularly hard, looking very superior.

"Champion Potter of Gringotts used Gillyweed to great effect," continued Dumbledore, "He returned last and well outside the time limit of an hour. However, Merchieftan Murcus explained that Harry aided his fellow champion against marauding Grindylows before returning her to the surface using an emergency portkey when she was overwhelmed. Though he failed to rescue his own hostage, he rescued Gabrielle Delacour a hostage which he felt was of greater significance, in accordance with the clue provided for this task of the tournament." Hermione gave Harry a half-exasperated, half-commiserating look. "Most of the judges," and here Dumbledore paused to give Karkaroff and Umbridge a significant sidelong glance, "feel that this was an embodiment and demonstration of the honor, loyalty and courage and merits full marks. However, Mr. Potter's score is forty-five points."

Harry's did the mental arithmetic, and cursed under his breath as 'Mione confirmed his math: He tied for first place with Cedric, instead of getting out of the tournament, now he had to compete in the final task. Next time, he promised himself, Dobby would cook the golden egg and then he would eat the damn thing.

Fleur was clapping very hard. Krum applauded politely but when he managed to catch Harry's eye, the Bulgarian nodded ever so slightly. Harry returned the gesture with a start and realized that with Victor, it was more about what he did than what he said. Harry knew that he could count the Bulgarian amongst his friends.

"The third and final task will take place at dusk on the twenty-fourth of June," continued the headmaster. "The champions will be notified of what is coming precisely one month beforehand. Thank you all for your support of the champions."

It was over. Harry thought dazedly, as Madam Pomfrey began herding the champions and hostages back to the castle to get into dry clothes... it was over, he had got through... he didn't have to worry about anything now until June the twenty-fourth...

Chapter 14

The Rebirth of Padfoot

Time continued its unstoppable advance, and the weather followed suit. The snows and crisp air of February gave way to the drier weather of March but the wind continued to skin their hands and faces of everyone who left the castle. Owl post was delayed as the unfortunate creatures kept getting turned around or just blown off course by the vicious wind and weather. Though Harry had sent an owl to Sirius to keep him up to date on the second task, his godfather had written back, and unlike their previous exchange of post, this one was terse and to the point:

Discovered information. Things you should know. Home within the Castle after sunset.

Harry slipped the parchment to Hermione who read it and looked at him. He nodded and she shrugged. Harry folded up the letter, thinking. If he was honest with himself, he really wanted to see Sirius again. He therefore approached the final lesson of the afternoon - double Potions - feeling considerably more cheerful than he usually did when descending the steps to the dungeons.

Though exempt from regular classes as a Triwizard Champion, the one subject that none of his tutors or trainers could help him with Potions. He had no choice but to suffer through that particular class and his good mood took a hit when he saw Ron arrive with the rest of the Slytherins, laughing about something. He stared at his former best friend and gave the group a wide berth. That did not stop Ron from glaring as he walked past.

The lesson dragged on in its usual biased manner, with Snape going after Neville who had been faring better than usual, as his skin grew thicker and more resistant to Snape's verbal barrages. Harry on the other hand, was dragged to the front row, just because. Whatever good mood he had, vanished as Snape managed to find flaw in every step Harry made, whether it was grinding his scarab beetles too fine, or for not slicing the ginger roots fine enough. He feigned deafness and ignored the potions master as best he could as the head of Slytherin house sniped at him, looking for any reason to assign detention, or to dock Gryffindor fifty points before the end of the class.

"You might be laboring under the delusion that the entire wizarding world is impressed with you," Snape went on, so quietly that no one else could hear him, "but I don't care. You are nothing but a pesky little rule breaker. So I give you fair warning, Potter," Snape continued in a softer and more dangerous voice, "pint-sized celebrity or not - if I catch you breaking into my office one more time -"

"I haven't been anywhere near your office!" said Harry angrily, forgetting his feigned deafness. It was the truth: Hermione had taken the boomslang skin for the polyjuice in their second year, and Griphook had provided the Gillyweed.

"Don't lie to me," Snape hissed his fathomless black eyes boring into Harry. "Boomslang skin! Gillyweed! Both come from my private stores!"

"Right," said Harry coolly, "I'll bear that in mind if I ever get the urge to go in there."

Snape's eyes flashed as he plunged his hand inside his black robes. For one wild moment, Harry thought Snape was about to pull out his wand and curse him - then he saw that Snape had drawn out a small crystal bottle of a completely clear potion. Harry stared at it.

"Do you know what this is Potter?" Snape said, his eyes glittering dangerously again, waiting for Harry to shake his head before continuing, "It is Veritaserum - a truth potion so powerful that three drops would have you spilling your innermost secrets for this entire class to hear," said Snape viciously. "Now, the use of this potion is controlled by very strict Ministry guidelines. But unless you watch your step, you might just find that my hand slips" - he shook the crystal bottle slightly - "right over your evening pumpkin juice. And then Potter... then we'll find out whether you've been in my office or not."

That truth potion was something that he would have to watch out for. Slipping it in to his drink when he was not looking was just the sort of thing Snape or a Slytherin would do. He wondered whether he should start drinking from a personally prepared hip flask, just like Auror Moody when there was a knock on the dungeon door.

"Enter," said Snape in his usual voice. The class looked around as the door opened. Headmaster Karkaroff of Durmstrang came in. Everyone watched him as he walked up toward Snape's desk. He was twisting his finger around his goatee and looking agitated.

"We need to talk," said Karkaroff abruptly when he had reached Snape. He seemed so determined that nobody should hear what he was saying that he was barely moving his lips, like a rather poor ventriloquist. Harry kept his eyes on his ginger roots, listening hard.

"I'll talk to you after my lesson, Karkaroff," Snape muttered, but Karkaroff interrupted him.

"I want to talk now, while you can't slip off, Severus. You've been avoiding me."

"After the lesson," Snape snapped. Under the pretext of holding up a measuring cup to see if he had poured out enough armadillo bile, Harry sneaked a sidelong glance at the pair of them. Karkaroff looked extremely worried, and Snape looked angry. Karkaroff hovered behind Snape's desk for the rest of the double period, intent on preventing Snape from slipping away. Keen to hear what Karkaroff wanted to say, Harry deliberately knocked over his bottle of armadillo bile with two minutes to go to the bell, which gave him an excuse to duck down behind his cauldron and mop up while the rest of the class moved noisily toward the door. "What's so urgent?" he heard Snape hiss at Karkaroff.

"This," said Karkaroff, and Harry, peering around the edge of his cauldron, saw Karkaroff pull up the left-hand sleeve of his robe and show Snape something on his inner forearm.

"Well?" said Karkaroff, still making every effort not to move his lips. "Do you see? It's never been this clear, never since -"

"Put it away!" snarled Snape, his black eyes sweeping the classroom.

"But you must have noticed -" Karkaroff began in an agitated voice.

"We can talk later, Karkaroff!" spat Snape. "Potter! What are you doing?"

"Clearing up my armadillo bile, Professor," said Harry innocently, straightening up and showing Snape the sodden rag he was holding. Karkaroff turned on his heel and strode out of the dungeon. He looked both worried and angry. Not wanting to remain alone with an exceptionally angry Snape, Harry threw his books and ingredients back into his bag and left at top speed.

The message from Sirius occupied a good deal of Harry's thoughts, leaving him somewhat absent minded at dinner. Not that many people noticed since the twins had laced several items at the Slytherin table with a few new products they wanted to test. He barely noticed that almost everyone at that particular house table had sprouted canary yellow feathers, a pair of antlers or horns during their meal in a "break out of animal magnetism" compliments of the Prank Masters.

He pushed away his half eaten dinner and left. Hermione followed. The rest of the retinue made no comment – Snape was enough to put any of them off food. And Harry's history with the greasy potions master was enough to put most off two meals. Though they debated following, a single glance from Hermione made it clear that everyone should just steer clear of Harry for a couple of hours. That meant, staying clear of the residence. Not that any of them minded - they still had a common room.

"Hello, Sirius," said Harry. His godfather was wearing the same ragged gray robes he'd been wearing for over a year now. The same ones he had probably worn in Azkaban. His hair was a long, black shaggy mane that trailed half way down his back. He looked... he was thin. The remains of several meals lay on the table. No doubt, Dobby and Winky had taken care of their guest. He grinned up at Harry, but Harry returned the grin only reluctantly, "What're you doing here?" he said.

"Fulfilling my duty as godfather," said Sirius, gnawing on the chicken bone in a very doglike way. "Don't worry about it." He was still grinning, but seeing the anxiety in Harry's face, said more seriously, "I want to be on the spot. Let's just say things are getting fishier. He nodded at a yellowing stack of Quibbler's and Daily Prophets on a side table.

Hermione picked them up and unfolded them. Harry, however, continued to stare at Sirius. "What if they catch you? What if you're seen?"

"Four students and Dumbledore are the only ones around here who know I'm an Animagus," said Sirius, and continued to devour the chicken leg.

Hermione nudged Harry and passed him the Daily Prophets. There were two: The first bore the headline "Mystery Illness of Bartemius Crouch." The second read "Ministry Witch Still Missing-Minister of Magic Now Personally Involved." Harry scanned the story about Crouch. Phrases jumped out at him: Has not been seen in public since November... house appears deserted... St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries decline comment... Ministry refuses to confirm rumors of critical illness... "They're making it sound like he's dying," said Harry slowly. "But he can't be that ill if he managed to get up here... He did look ill, last time I saw him up close." said Harry slowly, still reading the story, "The night my name came out of the goblet..."

"Getting his comeuppance for sacking Winky, isn't he?" said Hermione, an edge to her voice, "I bet he wishes he hadn't done it now - bet he feels the difference now she's not there to look after him."

Sirius looked interested. "Crouch sacked his house-elf?"

"Yeah, at the Quidditch World Cup," said Harry, and he launched into the story of the Dark Mark's appearance, and Winky being found with Harry's wand clutched in her hand, and Mr. Crouch's fury. When Harry had finished, Sirius was on his feet again and had started pacing up and down.

"Let me get this straight," he said after a while, brandishing a fresh chicken leg. "You first saw the elf in the Top Box. She was saving Crouch a seat, right?"

"Right," said Harry.

"But Crouch didn't turn up for the match?"

"No," said Harry. "I think he said he'd been too busy." Sirius paced all around the room, chewing through another plate of food. The discussions went back and forth, as theories evolved and ultimately shot down. There were too many people in the Top Box. Anyone could have stolen the wand. Winky was a possibility, but since she was working for Harry, they questioned her quickly and she admitted that she had not taken the wand. Finally, Sirius held up a hand for silence, "When the Dark Mark had been conjured, and the elf had been discovered holding Harry's wand, what did Crouch do?"

"Went to look in the bushes," said Harry, "but there wasn't anyone else there."

"Of course," Sirius muttered, pacing up and down, "He'd want to pin it on anyone but his own elf... and then he sacked her?" Sirius shook his head and said, "If you want to know what a man's like, take a good look at how he treats his inferiors, not his equals." He ran a hand over his unshaven face, evidently thinking hard. "All these absences of Barty Crouch's... he goes to the trouble of making sure his house-elf saves him a seat at the Quidditch World Cup, but doesn't bother to turn up and watch. He works very hard to reinstate the Triwizard Tournament, and then stops coming to that too... It's not like Crouch. If he's ever taken a day off work because of illness before this, I'll eat Buckbeak."

"Dye know Crouch, then?" said Harry.

Sirius's face darkened. He suddenly looked as menacing as he had the night when Harry first met him, the night when Harry still believed Sirius to be a murderer. "Oh I know Crouch all right," he said quietly. "He was the one who gave the order for me to be sent to Azkaban - without a trial."

"What?" said Harry

"You're kidding!" said Hermione

"No, I'm not," said Sirius, taking another great bite of chicken. "Crouch used to be Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, didn't you know? He was tipped for the next Minister of Magic," said Sirius. "He's a great wizard, Barty Crouch, powerfully magical and power hungry. Oh never a Voldemort supporter," he said, reading the look on Harry's face. "No, Barty Crouch was always

very outspoken against the Dark Side. But then a lot of people who were against the Dark Side... well, you wouldn't understand... you're too young..."

"That's what Mr. Weasley said at the World Cup," sighed Hermione. Just to make her point, she pretended to swoon in to Harry who deftly caught her, she grinned at her boyfriends' godfather, "Try us, why don't you?"

A grin flashed across Sirius's thin face. "All right, I'll try you..." he grabbed a glass of juice, "Imagine that Voldemort's powerful now. You do not know who his supporters are, you do not know who is working for him and who isn't; you know he can control people so that they do terrible things without being able to stop themselves. You're scared for yourself, and your family, and your friends. Every week, news comes of more deaths, more disappearances, more torturing... the Ministry of Magic's in disarray, they don't know what to do, they're trying to keep everything hidden from the Muggles, but meanwhile, Muggles are dying too. Terror everywhere...panic...confusion... that's how it used to be."

"Well, times like that bring out the best in some people and the worst in others. Crouch's principles might've been good in the beginning - I wouldn't know. He rose quickly through the Ministry, and took the fight to the dark side. He authorized Auror to kill instead of capture, used Hit Wizards to kill known death eaters. It was rumored that the Unspeakables from the Department of Mysteries were doing, well unspeakable things to counter Voldemort. Suspects were remanded to Azkaban without trial. There were dozens like me in there. Many were forgotten about," he shuddered.

"Crouch fought violence with violence, and authorized the use of the Unforgivable Curses against suspects. I would say he became as ruthless and cruel as many on the Dark Side. He had his supporters, mind you - plenty of people thought he was going about things the right way, and there were a lot of witches and wizards clamoring for him to take over as Minister of Magic. When Voldemort disappeared, it looked like only a matter of time until Crouch got the top job. But then something rather unfortunate happened..." Sirius smiled grimly. "Crouch's own son was caught with a group of Death Eaters who'd managed to talk their way out of Azkaban. Apparently they were trying to find Voldemort and return him to power."

"Crouch's son was caught?" gasped Hermione.

"Yep," said Sirius, throwing a chicken bone on to a plate. He tore a loaf of bread in half, "Nasty little shock for old Barty, I'd imagine. Should have spent a bit more time at home with his family, shouldn't he? Ought to have left the office early once in a while... gotten to know his own son." He began to wolf down large pieces of bread.

"Was his son a Death Eater?" said Harry.

"No idea," said Sirius, still stuffing down bread. "I was already in Azkaban when he was brought in. This is mostly stuff I've found out since I got out. The boy was definitely caught in the company of people I'd bet my life were Death Eaters – but he might have been in the wrong place at the wrong time, just like the house-elf."

"Did Crouch try and get his son off?" Hermione whispered.

Sirius let out a laugh that was much more like a bark. "Crouch let his son off? Anything that threatened to tarnish his reputation had to go; he had dedicated his whole life to becoming Minister of Magic. You saw him dismiss a devoted house-elf because she associated him with the Dark Mark - doesn't that tell you what he's like? Crouch's "fatherly affection" stretched just far enough to give his son a trial, where he demonstrated how much he hated his own flesh and blood before letting the Dementors have him!"

"He gave his own son to the Dementors?" asked Harry quietly.

"That's right," said Sirius. He did not look remotely amused now. "The Dementors marched him right past my cell when they were bringing him in. He can't have been more than nineteen. His cell was near mine, and by nightfall, he was screaming for his mother. By dawn the next day, he'd lost his voice. He went quiet after a few days, though... they all went quiet in the end... except when they shrieked in their sleep..." For a moment, the deadened look in Sirius's eyes became more pronounced than ever, as though shutters had closed behind them.

"So he's still in Azkaban?" Harry said.

"No," said Sirius dully. "No, he's not in there anymore. He died about a year after they brought him in. He wasn't the only one," said Sirius

bitterly. "Most go mad in there, and plenty stop eating in the end. They lose the will to live. You could always tell when a death was coming, because the Dementors could sense it, they got excited. That boy looked pretty sickly when he arrived. Crouch and his wife were allowed a deathbed visit. That was the last time I saw Barty Crouch, carrying his wife past my cell. She died herself, apparently, shortly afterward. Grief. Wasted away just like the boy. Crouch never came for his son's body. The Dementors disposed of his body, like they did all the rest: They tossed it in to the sea."

Sirius threw aside the bread he had just lifted to his mouth, instead picked up the glass of pumpkin juice, and drained it. "So Crouch lost it all, just when he thought he had it made," he continued, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "One moment, hero, poised to become Minister of Magic... next, his son dead, his wife dead, the family name dishonored, and, a big drop in popularity. Once the boy had died, people started feeling a bit more sympathetic toward the son and started asking how a nice young lad from a good family had gone so badly astray. The conclusion was that his father never cared much for him. So Cornelius Fudge got the top job, and Crouch was shunted sideways into the Department of International Magical Cooperation."

There was a long silence. Harry was thinking of the way Crouch's eyes had bulged as he had looked down at his disobedient house-elf back in the wood at the Quidditch World Cup. This, then, must have been why Crouch had overreacted to Winky being found beneath the Dark Mark. It had brought back memories of his son, and the old scandal, and his fall from grace at the Ministry.

"So... Crouch is obsessed with catching Dark wizards," concluded Hermione.

"Yeah, I've heard it's become a bit of a mania with him," said Sirius, nodding. "He still thinks he can bring back the old popularity by catching one more Death Eater. So when I found out Snape was teaching here, I've wondered why Dumbledore hired him. Snape's always been fascinated by the Dark Arts, he was famous for it at school. Slimy, oily, greasy-haired kid, he was," Sirius added and the teens shared a grin, "Snape knew more curses when he arrived at school than half the kids in seventh year, and he was part of a gang of Slytherins who nearly all turned out to be Death Eaters."

Sirius held up his fingers and began ticking off names, "Rosier and Wilkes - they were both killed by Aurors the year before Voldemort fell. The Lestranges - they're a married couple - they're in Azkaban. Avery - from what I've heard he wormed his way out of trouble by saying he'd been acting under the Imperious Curse - he's still at large. But as far as I know, Snape was never even accused of being a Death Eater - not that that means much. Plenty of them were never caught."

"Snape knows Karkaroff pretty well, but he wants to keep that quiet," said Harry; "You should've seen Snape's face when Karkaroff turned up in Potions!" said Harry quickly. "Karkaroff wanted to talk to Snape, but Snape's been avoiding him. Karkaroff showed Snape something on his arm, but I couldn't see what it was."

"He showed Snape something on his arm?" said Sirius, looking frankly bewildered. He ran his fingers distractedly through his filthy hair, and then shrugged again. "Well, I've no idea what that's about... but if Karkaroff's genuinely worried, and he's going to Snape for answers..." Sirius stared at the wall then made a grimace of frustration. "There's still the fact that Dumbledore trusts Snape, and I know Dumbledore trusts where a lot of other people wouldn't, but I just can't see him letting Snape teach at Hogwarts if he'd ever worked for Voldemort." Sirius heaved an enormous sigh and rubbed his shadowed eyes. "What's the time?"

"It's half past nine," said Hermione.

Harry considered the situation; "Sirius, you know that things have gone from bad to worse with Ron right?" his godfather could only nod. Harry did not want to say it, because somehow, that would just make all of it, true. He had been hoping to save that friendship. Now however, he had to choose, between his perhaps former friend, and his godfather. In the end, there was only one choice, "Ron is no longer a friend. He hasn't been for a long time." The words seemed to stick in his throat, but he finally managed to get them out, "It's only a matter of time before he uses what he knows."

Sirius sighed, "I'd heard about the break up between you three." he nodded, "Don't suppose your goblin friends could help?"

"They can," said Harry, "Winky!" the elf popped in, "Please contact Griphook immediately. Message: Sanctum."

Griphook had been aware of the situation surrounding Sirius Black since its inception. The Goblins had also long been aware of Mr. Black's innocence for sometime before Harry had merely reconfirmed the truth of what they had already known. When Winky popped in, and delivered the one word message, Griphook's response arrived with Winky moments later, "Sanctum arising."

Griphook arrived thirty minutes later with a pair of Goblins in tow, "Mr. Black," said Griphook, "It has been a long time since we last met."

"Almost thirteen years," he agreed, "I trust that your clan prospers?"

Griphook smiled, "As well as can be expected during such times." He gestured the pair of Goblins that had accompanied him. One carried a battle axe slung over one shoulder, the other, had a pair of short swords, more like overly large daggers riding in scabbards set against his thighs. The two Goblins set to work, changing Sirius's appearance first and tying them to a pendant charmed invisible so that only Sirius himself could remove it.

Sirius grinned as a new face grinned back at him from a mirror, "Nice to know I can wander around in public," His long hair was as long as ever, but was silvery shot through with streaks of yellow amber with eyes that were a deep blue that bordered on the unnatural.

"Mr. Wolf," said Harry, experimentally, "It's a pleasure to finally meet you; I didn't get your first name?"

"Blake," he replied, his voice sounded slighter deeper, and had been twisted to give a North American accent, "Blake Wolf, Mr. Potter," Sirius held his hand out for a moment, and Harry grinned. Harry managed to catch the Goblin's eye and gave him a significant nod. Griphook bowed, and the trio took their leave by Floo.

"Well Mr. Wolf," said Harry as he took the outstretched hand, "I trust we can keep this secret." There was a flash, near blinding as Harry maintained a firm grip on his Godfather's hand. When the flare subsided, only two people in the room knew who Mr. Wolf really was: The Secret Keepers of the modified Fidelius charm: Sirius Black and Harry Potter.

"So, what my gig and the pay like?" said the only American in the room.

Harry grinned, "Well, Mr. Wolf, dueling especially incorporating physical attacks with magical ones. Perhaps healing and Animagus Training." Hermione blinked, and looked around, very bewildered before taking in the sight of the blonde, blue-eyed man. She looked around Sirius was gone. Remus Lupin entered the room, wand in hand, as he sized up the stranger.

"And you are?" the former defense against the dark arts professor asked.

"Blake. Blake Wolf," was the answer, "Newly hired tutor for Mr. Potter," he held out his hand, "I presume you are Remus Lupin?" The two men shook hands. It was a clean handshake: A firm grip, one pumping action and they broke contact with each other. Moony, was clearly on guard, "Harry has told me a great deal about you. As a teacher, and a friend, he holds you in very high regard." Reintroductions were necessary as Harry and Blake revealed the secret of his new identity. The modified Fidelius worked as Griphook had promised, "Goblins have been using this variation of the charm for several centuries," explained Harry. Pragmatically, he did not ask why.

He had set "Project Sanctum" in motion after the dinner with the other Champions and Amelia Bones. With no way to pardon Sirius, it was only a matter of time before he was discovered. Harry would not let the last of his family be hunted like a savage beast. Hermione had questioned the necessity of so drastic an action, "Do we have a choice?" Harry had countered, "With Ron knowing what he knows, I don't see it as a matter of "if" it happens, but "when." It is better this way," he turned to Sirius, "You can tell whoever you want... just be careful who you trust, including Dumbledore." Harry said darkly, "A trial, your memories, a pensieve and you would never have been sent to Azkaban. Dumbledore could have gotten you that trial. He didn't."

Later that night after the rest of the Harry's retinue and the champions had met the new tutor, Harry made sure that Blake was setup in his own suite of rooms, cued to the wards and the Floo; he gave his godfather a hug, and retired to his room, where Hermione

was waiting for him. She had learned to read his moods, as he had hers. She had her doubts, but he simply held her close and as she drifted off to sleep, she knew there was no place she would rather be.

Chapter 15

The Grounds of Madness

The start of the summer term would normally have meant that Harry was training hard for the last Quidditch match of the season. This year it was the third and final task in the Triwizard Tournament, but he still did not know what he would have to do. Finally, in the last week of May, Professor McGonagall sent a message to him, "You are to go down to the Quidditch field tonight at nine o'clock," she had written, "Mr. Bagman will be there to tell the champions about the third task."

That night, Harry left his retinue in the residence and made his way to the Entrance Hall, Cedric emerged from the Hufflepuff common room, "What d'you reckon it's going to be?" he asked Harry as they went together down the stone steps, out into the cloudy night. "Fleur keeps going on about underground tunnels; she reckons we've got to find treasure."

"That wouldn't be too bad," said Harry, thinking back to the traps around the Philosopher's Stone during his first year.

They walked down the dark lawn to the Quidditch stadium, turned through a gap in the stands, and walked out onto the field. "What've they done to it?" Cedric said indignantly, stopping dead. The Quidditch field was no longer smooth and flat. It looked as though somebody had been building long, low walls all over it that twisted and crisscrossed in every direction.

"They're hedges!" said Harry, bending to examine the nearest one.

"Hello there!" called a cheery voice. Ludo Bagman was standing in the middle of the field with Victor and Fleur. Harry and Cedric made their way toward them, climbing over the hedges. "Well, what d'you think?" said Bagman happily as Harry and Cedric climbed over the last hedge. "Growing nicely, aren't they? Give them a month and Hagrid'll have them twenty feet high. Don't worry," he added, grinning, spotting the less than- happy expressions on Harry's and Cedric's faces, "You'll have your Quidditch field back to normal once the task is over! Now, I imagine you can guess what we're making here?"

No one spoke for a moment. Then, "Maze," grunted Viktor.

"That's right!" said Bagman. "A maze. The third task's really very straightforward. The Triwizard Cup will be placed in the center of the maze. The first champion to touch it will receive full marks."

"We simply have to get through a maze?" said Fleur.

"There will be obstacles," said Bagman happily, bouncing on the balls of his feet. "Hagrid is providing a number of creatures...then there will be spells, traps and enchantments. The champions who are leading on points will get a head start into the maze." He smiled at Harry and Cedric. "Then Champion Krum will enter and finally Champion Delacour. But you'll all be in with a fighting chance, depending how well you get past the obstacles. Should be fun, eh?"

Harry, who knew only too well the kind of creatures that Hagrid was likely to provide for an event like this, thought it was unlikely to be any fun at all. However, he nodded politely like the other champions.

"Very well... if you haven't got any questions, we'll go back up to the castle, shall we, it's a bit chilly..."

The Champions lingered for a few moments; it was not long before they too were heading up towards the castle, in conversation about the task itself. Cedric and Fleur pulled slightly ahead and Viktor suppressed a smirk in their direction. He stared at Harry for a few seconds and then said, "You fly very well. I was watching at the first task."

Harry grinned, "And I saw you at the Quidditch World Cup. The Wronski Feint you pulled..." Something was moving behind Krum, in the trees. Harry's first thought was the Arcomantulas that lived in the forest and grabbed Viktor's arm and pull him around. His wand slid in to his hand from its forearm auror holster, "Contact!" snapped Harry.

Viktor's wand was raised as they spread out slightly. Fleur and Cedric were no longer lovers lost in each other as both turned, wands drawn towards the source of movement, "What is it?" asked Victor.

Harry shook his head, staring at the place where he had seen movement. Suddenly a man staggered out from behind a tall oak. For a moment, Harry did not recognize him... then he realized it was Mr. Crouch. He looked as though he had been traveling for days. The knees of his robes were ripped and bloody, his face scratched; he was unshaven and gray with exhaustion. His neat hair and mustache were both in need of a wash and a trim. His strange appearance, however, was nothing to the way he was behaving. Muttering and gesticulating, Mr. Crouch appeared to be talking to someone that he alone could see. He reminded Harry vividly of an old tramp he had seen once when out shopping with the Dursleys. That man too had been conversing wildly with thin air; Aunt Petunia had seized Dudley's hand and pulled him across the road to avoid him; Uncle Vernon had then treated the family to a long rant about what he would like to do with beggars and vagrants.

"Isn't he a judge?" said Krum, staring at Mr. Crouch. "Isn't he with your Ministry of Magic?"

Harry nodded, hesitated for a moment, "Cover me," and then walked slowly toward Mr. Crouch, who did not look at him, but continued to talk to a nearby tree.

"... and when you've done that, Weatherby, send an owl to Dumbledore confirming the number of Durmstrang students who will be attending the tournament, Karkaroff has just sent word there will be twelve..."

"Mr. Crouch?" said Harry cautiously.

"... and then send another owl to Madame Maxime, because she might want to up the number of students she's bringing, now Karkaroff's made it a round dozen... do that, Weatherby, will you? Will you? Will..."

Mr. Crouch's eyes were bulging. He stood staring at the tree, muttering soundlessly at it. Then he staggered sideways and fell to his knees. "Mr. Crouch?" Harry said loudly. "Are you all right?"

Crouch's eyes were rolling in his head. Harry looked around at Krum, who had followed him into the trees, and was looking down at Crouch in alarm, "What's wrong with him?"

"No idea," Harry muttered. "Listen, you'd better go and get someone ..."

"Dumbledore!" gasped Mr. Crouch. He reached out and seized a handful of Harry's robes, dragging him closer, though his eyes were staring over Harry's head. "I need... see... Dumbledore...I've done... stupid... thing..." Mr. Crouch breathed. He looked utterly mad. His eyes were rolling and bulging, and a trickle of spittle was sliding down his chin. Every word he spoke seemed to cost him a terrible effort. "Must... tell... Dumbledore..."

"Get up, Mr. Crouch," said Harry loudly and clearly. "Get up, I'll take you to Dumbledore!"

Mr. Crouch's eyes rolled forward onto Harry. "Who... you?" he whispered.

"I'm a student at the school," said Harry, looking around at Krum for some help, but Krum was hanging back, looking extremely nervous.

"You're not... his?" whispered Crouch, his mouth sagging. Harry did not have the faintest idea what Crouch was talking about. "Dumbledore's?" Crouch was pulling him closer; Harry tried to loosen Crouch's grip on his robes, but it was too powerful. "Warn... Dumbledore..."

Something Professor McGonagall had said to him once came back, "When in doubt, it is better to take immediate action and overreact than to be taken off guard. "I'll get Dumbledore if you let go of me," said Harry. "Just let go, Mr. Crouch, and I'll get him..."

"Thank you, Weatherby, and when you have done that, I would like a cup of tea. My wife and son will be arriving shortly; we are attending a concert tonight with Mr. and Mrs. Fudge." Crouch was now talking fluently to a tree again, and seemed completely unaware that Harry was there, which surprised Harry so much he did not notice that Crouch had released him. "Yes, my son has recently gained twelve O.W.L.S, most satisfactory, yes, thank you, yes, very proud indeed. Now, if you could bring me that memo from the Andorran Minister of Magic, I think I will have time to draft a response..."

He realized it would take too long for the Goblin's to reach them out on the grounds. "Viktor, Cedric, Fleur," he ordered, "Stay with him. I'll get... Dumbledore," he could not believe he had just said that, "I know where his office is."

"He is mad," said Krum doubtfully, staring down at Crouch, who was still gabbling to the tree, apparently convinced it was Percy.

"Just stay with him," said Harry, starting to get up, but his movement seemed to trigger another abrupt change in Mr. Crouch, who seized him hard around the knees and pulled Harry back to the ground.

"Don't... leave... me!" he whispered, his eyes bulging again. "I... escaped... must warn... must tell... see Dumbledore... my fault... all my fault... Bertha... dead... all my fault... my son... my fault... tell Dumbledore... Harry Potter... the Dark Lord... stronger... Harry Potter..."

"I'll get Dumbledore if you let me go, Mr. Crouch!" said Harry. He looked furiously around at Krum. "Help me, will you?"

Looking extremely apprehensive, Krum moved forward, squatted down next to Mr. Crouch, and cast a calming charm to relax the distraught man.

"Just keep him here," said Harry, pulling himself free of Mr. Crouch. "I'll be back with Dumbledore."

"Hurry, please," called Fleur after him as Harry sprinted away from the forest and up through the dark grounds. Harry tore up the stone steps, through the oak front doors, and off up the marble staircase, toward the second floor. Five minutes later, he was hurtling toward a stone gargoyle standing halfway along an empty corridor.

"Sher - sherbet lemon!" he panted. This was the password to the hidden staircase to Dumbledore's office - or at least, it had been two years ago. The password had evidently changed, however, for the stone gargoyle did not spring to life and jump aside, but stood frozen, glaring at Harry malevolently. "Move!" Harry shouted at it. "C'mon!"

However, nothing at Hogwarts had ever moved just because he shouted at it; he knew it was no good. He looked up and down the

dark corridor when inspiration struck, "Lady of the Castle, if you can hear me I require the aid of headmaster –"

"POTTER!" Harry looked around. Snape had just emerged from the hidden staircase behind the stone gargoyle. The wall was sliding shut behind him. "What are you doing here, Potter?"

"I need to see Professor Dumbledore!" said Harry, running back up the corridor and skidding to a standstill in front of Snape instead. "It's Mr. Crouch... he's just turned up... he's in the forest... he's asking -"

"What is this rubbish?" said Snape, his black eyes glittering. "What are you talking about?"

"Mr. Crouch!" said Harry, "From the Ministry! He's ill or something - he's in the forest, he wants to see Dumbledore! Just give me the password up to -"

"The headmaster is busy. Potter," said Snape, his thin mouth curling into an unpleasant smile.

"I've got to tell Dumbledore!" Harry voice dropped in volume, to that chilling cold tone he had leveled at a select few people thus far this year.

"Didn't you hear me, Potter?" Harry could tell Snape was thoroughly enjoying himself, denying Harry.

"My Lady, if you can hear me," Harry thought, "I would really, appreciate your help right now. Please!"

Snape vanished. Harry blinked and turned a full circle, wondering just where the head of Slytherin house had vanished. The stone wall slid open and there, wearing long green robes and an expression that mingled curiosity and surprise, stood the headmaster, "I was just about to take a shower..." he seemed confused, but then, so was Harry, "Is there a problem Harry?"

"Headmaster," Harry said, "Mr. Crouch is here - he's down in the forest, he wants to speak to you!" Harry expected Dumbledore to ask questions, but to his relief, Dumbledore did nothing of the sort.

"Lead the way," he said promptly, and he swept off along the corridor behind Harry. "What did Mr. Crouch say?" said Dumbledore as they walked swiftly down the marble staircase, transfiguring his robes as they moved.

"Said he wants to warn you... said he's done something terrible... he mentioned his son... and Bertha Jorkins... and Voldemort... something about Voldemort getting stronger... He's not acting normally," Harry said, hurrying along beside Dumbledore. "He doesn't seem to know where he is. He keeps talking as if he thinks Percy Weasley's there, and then he changes, and says he needs to see you... I left him with the three other champions. There should be several members of the Agaan Gharaar there too," said Harry, his tongue twisting its way around the Gobbledegook with an ease that surprised the headmaster.

Dumbledore began to take longer strides still, "Do you know if anybody else saw Mr. Crouch?"

"No," said Harry. "You had just finished telling us about the third task and we were talking when Mr. Crouch came out of the forest -" his wand was still in his hand as they crossed the grounds.

"Where are they?" said Dumbledore as the Beauxbatons carriage emerged from the darkness.

"Over here," said Harry, moving in front of Dumbledore, leading the way through the trees. He could not hear Crouch's voice anymore, but he knew where he was going; it had not been much past the Beauxbatons carriage... somewhere around here...something was not right, "Viktor? Cedric?" he called, "Fleur? Anyone here?" No one answered. "They were here," Harry said to Dumbledore, when he caught the smell of something, burnt, "They were definitely around here..."

"Lumos," Dumbledore said, lighting his wand and holding it up. Harry stared at the torch like beam of light, and had to restrain himself for raising his eyebrow – a gesture he had picked up from Viktor – in frustration.

"Plurios Lumos Maxima!" a half dozen glowing balls of light leapt from Harry's wand, and shot up, brushing the lowest branches of the trees, throwing illumination across the entire area. Harry was not

sure what shocked him more: The sight of three champions sprawled across the ground or more worryingly the fact that the area showed signs of combat. Spells had burned away chunks of the trees, and carved small scars in the earth. One was still smoking slightly. Spell damage accompanied four goblin warriors, almost certainly dead. One had died with his sword and axe sheathed. The wind shifted, blowing towards them and carrying, what Harry would come to know as the smell of death. The coppery scent of blood, a slightly more... chemical something. The goblins had literally been blown apart.

Harry and Dumbledore hurried forward to find Viktor and the other champions sprawled across the forest floor. There was no sign at all of Mr. Crouch. Dumbledore bent over and gently lifted one of Viktor's eyelids. "Stunned," he said softly. His half-moon glasses glittered in the wand light as he peered around at the surrounding trees.

Harry set to work immediately, "Ennervate Maxima!" he cast bringing the three champions back to consciousness.

Dumbledore had pointed his wand in the air and in the direction of Hagrid's cabin. Harry saw something silvery dart out of it and streak away through the trees like a ghostly bird. Krum opened his eyes. He looked dazed. When he saw Dumbledore, he tried to sit up, but Dumbledore put a hand on his shoulder and made him lie still. "He attacked me!" Krum muttered, putting a hand up to his head. "The old madman attacked me! I was looking around, when the Goblins arrived. And then we were attacked from behind!"

The sound of thunderous footfalls reached them, and Hagrid came panting into sight with Fang at his heels, his massive crossbow with the string drawn back and an arrow notched, "Professor Dumbledore!" he said, his eyes widening. "Harry - what the -?"

"Hagrid, I need you to fetch Professor Karkaroff and Madame Maxine," said Dumbledore, "Their students have been attacked. Harry, I presume you can reach Griphook. He should be informed" Harry nodded as the headmaster turned his attention back to Hagrid, "When you've done that, kindly alert Professor Moody -"

"No need, Dumbledore," said a wheezy growl. "I'm here." Moody was limping toward them, leaning on his staff, his wand lit. "Damn

leg," he said furiously. "Would've been here quicker... what's happened?"

Hagrid turned and disappeared into the dark trees, Fang trotting after him. "I don't know where Barty Crouch is," Dumbledore told Moody, "but it is essential that we find him."

"I'm on to it," growled Moody, and he pulled out his wand and limped off into the forest. Neither Dumbledore nor Harry spoke again until they heard the unmistakable sounds of Hagrid and Fang returning. Both headmaster and headmistress were close behind him, and they looked, to Harry, in two words, pissed off.

"What is this?" he cried when he saw Krum seated with his back to a tree, with the other two champions alongside him, "What's going on?"

"I was attacked!" said Krum, sitting up now and rubbing his head. "Mr. Crouch or somebody attacked us..."

"Crouch attacked you? Crouch attacked you? The Triwizard judge?" he rounded on Dumbledore, clutching his furs around him, and looked pissed off, "Treachery!" he bellowed, pointing at Dumbledore. "It is a plot! You and your Ministry of Magic have lured me here under false pretenses, Dumbledore! This is not an equal competition! First, you sneak Potter into the tournament, though he is underage! Now one of your Ministry friends attempts to put my champion out of action! I smell double-dealing and corruption in this whole affair, and you, Dumbledore, you, with your talk of closer international wizarding links, of rebuilding old ties, of forgetting old differences - here's what I think of you!"

Karkaroff spat onto the ground at Dumbledore's feet. In one swift movement, Hagrid seized the front of Karkaroff's furs, lifted him into the air, and slammed him against a nearby tree. "Apologize!" Hagrid snarled as Karkaroff gasped for breath, Hagrid's massive fist at his throat, his feet dangling in midair.

"Hagrid, no!" Dumbledore shouted, his eyes flashing. Hagrid removed the hand pinning Karkaroff to the tree, and Karkaroff slid all the way down the trunk and slumped in a huddle at its roots; a few twigs and leaves showered down upon his head.

"Kindly escort Harry back up to the castle, Hagrid," said Dumbledore sharply.

"That will not be, Headmaster Dumbledore," said a disembodied voice. Goblins warriors cancelled concealment charms, with weapons drawn and spells upon their fingertips. They had come for a fight. "Four Goblins of the Axe Master Honor Guard have been slain this night," said Griphook, his lips pursed together, "But they were able to dispatch a sprite with the warning from Ursh-kai Potter." Another dozen Goblins emerged from the tree line, "And an attack upon our Champion, is an attack upon Gringotts," said Griphook grimly.

"Whoever he was, he's gone then" growled Moody, "Found some footprints... but they lead off in to the Forest proper." The scarred veteran turned towards the forest. The one eyed Auror glanced at the crest, sewn in to the sleeves of the Goblin's tunics. Aurors and even Hit Wizards were wary of any Goblin that bore the crest of any Honor Guard. Though none would admit it publically, in private the Department of Magical Law Enforcement had doubts as to whether they could handle a full scale Goblin Revolt.

Madame Maxine sized up the situation and realized quickly that Albus Dumbledore was clearly not as in control as he claimed to be. Two of his students were champions in the tournament was bad enough, but that he could not even control one of them – even if it was Harry Potter did not sit well with her. Considering that Fleur had given her a rapid French summation, she would not be making any issue of this at present, mainly because her own school's Champion did not wish this to become public knowledge.

"This is disheartening to see, Headmaster Dumbledore," said the French headmistress, "I however, do not think that you would orchestrate such an attack," she cast a sidelong glance at Karkaroff, "Irrespective of what my colleagues may think."

There was no doubt that things were getting more than slightly out of hand. However the horse had bolted, and there was no point in shutting the gate. Harry was quick to realize that they were all stuck reacting to whatever whoever was planning. That rankled him a great deal, but not as much as what would come next. Griphook followed Harry's gaze to the dead, "They died in your service, Harry."

"I know," he let out a breath he did not know he had been holding. There was the smell of blood, of death in the air as he made his way amongst the dead, "Griphook, they died in my service," he knelt by the one of the dead, and careful drew the fallen Goblin's short sword, and with some difficulty did the same to the axe. He struggled to remember what he had read, the proper phrasing.

His friend stepped close and whispered the necessary incantation, one that Harry repeated. The Goblin's still standing guard turned to witness the soft glow engulf Harry as he knelt beside the only Goblin with his weapons sheathed, "Tharragan, fell with his blades sheathed," he said softly, but clearly. His voice carried to all those gathered, "But it was through his actions that the Clans were made aware of treachery this night. Though he did not fall, as a warrior should, he fell in defense of the honor of his Clan. He fell in defense of the honor of the Aga'an Gharaar Muukuur Hor." The Goblin's weapons slid smoothly from their sheaths, and Harry pressed them in to their owners' hands, "There is no dishonor, in his death."

Griphook nodded, "The funerals rites will be held, as is our custom." Harry nodded, "I will make arrangements," said Griphook, "You should take your leave."

No outsider had ever witnessed a Goblin funeral. Harry was not going to be the first.

Chapter 16

Mind Games

It was midweek, the third task of the tournament was not that far away and Harry found himself cursing himself, under his breath for the umpteenth time at having chosen to "study" divination. The tower was boiling hot as always as Professor Trelawney never opened the window and the heavy perfumed fumes washed over him. Despite his best efforts to stay awake – he had given up on learning anything in a particular class a long time ago; he felt his eyelids begin to droop. He nearly nodded off several times until finally sleep won out over his ability to focus on whatever vision of death his professor was currently going through.

Suddenly, he was riding the back of an eagle owl that soared through clear blue skies towards an old, rundown ivy covered house set high on the hillside. The creature descended, wind blowing gently in Harry's face until they reached a dark and broken window in the upper story of the house and entered. Now they were flying along a gloomy passageway that showed numerous signs of dank, rot and decay to the room at the very end of the corridor.

The door creaked open to reveal a dark room, where the windows were roughly barricaded. The occasional beam of sunshine was devoured by the shadows and the presence of something...evil. It was as if he was suddenly standing in a corner of the room, watching the owl as it fluttered across the room in to a high backed armchair. Two dark shapes were on the floor next to the chair. One was a massively long, almost evil looking snake. The other was a short balding man with watery eyes and a pointed nose, wheezing and sobbing on the hearthrug.

"You are in luck, Wormtail," said a cold, high-pitched voice from the depths of the chair in which the owl had landed. "You are very fortunate indeed. Your blunder has not ruined everything." A hand reached out, to stroke the snake's head, "He is dead."

"My Lord!" gasped the man on the floor. "My Lord, I am... I am so pleased... and so sorry..."

"Nagini," said the cold voice, "you are out of luck. I will not be feeding Wormtail to you, after all... but never mind, never mind..."

there is still Harry Potter..." The snake hissed. Harry could see its tongue fluttering. "Now, Wormtail," said the cold voice, "perhaps one more little reminder why I will not tolerate another blunder from you..."

"My Lord... no... I beg you..."

The tip of a wand emerged from around the back of the chair. It was pointing at Wormtail. He screamed, screamed as though every nerve in his body were on fire, the screaming filled Harry's ears as the scar on his forehead seared with pain; he was yelling too... Voldemort would hear him, would know he was there...

"Harry! Harry!" Harry opened his eyes. He was lying on the floor of Professor Trelawney's room with his hands over his face. His scar was still burning so badly that his eyes were watering. The pain had been real. The whole class was standing around him, and Neville was kneeling next to him, looking terrified. "You all right?" he said.

"Of course he isn't!" said Professor Trelawney, looking thoroughly excited. Her great eyes loomed over Harry, gazing at him. "What was it Potter? Premonition? Apparition? What did you see?"

"Nothing," Harry lied. He sat up. He could feel himself shaking. He could not stop himself from looking around, into the shadows behind him; Voldemorts' voice had sounded so close...

"You were clutching your scar!" said Professor Trelawney. "You were rolling on the floor, clutching your scar! Come now Potter, I have experience in these matters!"

Harry looked up at her, "I need to go to the hospital wing, I think," he said. "Bad headache."

"My dear, you were undoubtedly stimulated by the extraordinary clairvoyant vibrations of my room!" said Professor Trelawney. "If you leave now, you may lose the opportunity to see further than you have ever -"

"I don't want to see anything except a headache cure," said Harry as he stood and brushed off his robes. The rest of the class however backed away from him, more than a little unnerved by what they had witnessed. Neville nodded ever so slightly, and Harry did the same

in return as he picked up his bag and headed for the trapdoor, ignoring Professor Trelawney, who was wearing an expression of great frustration, as though she had just been denied a real treat.

When Harry reached the bottom of her stepladder, however, he did not set off for the hospital wing. He had no intention whatsoever of going there. He debated his options for a moment and summoned several fire sprites to deliver messages to the people that Harry trusted most before setting off across the castle back to the residence where he had arranged to meet them all, going over everything he had seen in his mind's eye. All of it had been so vivid, as he struggled to recall all of the details of what he had seen: Voldemort accusing Wormtail of making a blunder... But the owl had brought good news, the blunder had been repaired, somebody was dead... so Wormtail was not going to be fed to the snake... he, Harry, was going to be fed to it instead...

Gathered in what had become his de facto conference room, he glanced at the sea of faces surrounding him. Moony looked a great deal better than he had in previous months. There was life in his eyes instead of the hollow emptiness that he had seen at the end of his third year. The man was also looking better – it was no small wonder what a change in wardrobe could do. His Godfather, sans his disguise and alter ego was looking healthier than ever before. Griphook was also present, nodding to Harry as he entered the room. Not every member of the retinue was present however. He had elected to have only Hermione join him for this meeting. Sharing what he had seen took only a few minutes and discussions lasted only that long before they got heated or perhaps frosty would be term that is more appropriate.

"He is still the principal organizer of the tournament Harry," she said calmly or at least with what she hoped was calm. If she was at all honest with herself, she knew this was not something to be suggested lightly, "And, this might be the thing that can help... fix things between you and Dumbledore." The temperature in the room did seem to drop by a few degrees. Even more so when, however uncomfortable it made them, Griphook agreed with Hermione. Moony was hesitant to show support or opposition as his position, was tenuous at best. Padfoot was not inclined to trust Dumbledore and would perhaps have been somewhat content to throw the man to the Dementors – wolves would probably find Albus somewhat, indigestible.

Though those gathered had spoken, Harry had trashed things out, deliberately, and was not sure whether to be pleased or aggravated by the result. In many ways, these were his people, his advisors, his friends and family to varying degrees. Though he did not like it, they were right: Dumbledore was still the greatest wizard of the century, and who probably knew more about Voldemort than anyone else alive. Such as it was, the Goblins had few reliable records on Lord Voldemort.

With a sigh, the meeting adjourned and Harry accompanied by Griphook and his godfather in disguise ascended in to the castle. Harry lead the way to the stone gargoyle that guarded the entrance to Dumbledore's office and then realized that none of them knew the password, "...Sherbet Lemon?" he tried tentatively before turning to the pair flanking him, the gargoyle had not moved, "It's a sweet. But which one..." Harry shrugged, "Pear Drop?"

Griphook shrugged. What did he know about muggle confectionary? Never mind wizarding! "Blake" stared at the door for a long moment and then ventured in to the fray, "Licorice Wands? Fizzing Whizbee? Drooble's Best Blowing Gum? Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans?"

Harry shook his head at the last one, "He doesn't like those," he turned and stared at the gargoyle for a long moment, "Can't you just open. I really need to see him." Unnoticed by the trio, the eyes of the gargoyle were actually moving. The Lady watched them trying desperately to guess the password until she finally decided that they made a suitably amusing guess to compensate for the fact that Harry had kicked "her."

"Cockroach Cluster!" The gargoyle sprang to life and jumped aside. Harry blinked.

"Cockroach Cluster?" he said, amazed. "I was only joking..."

"You will find, that I am much more amenable when asked for assistance, Mr. Potter," she whispered softly. The wizard spun round wildly to the consternation of his two companions who stared at him as if he spun round. Harry suddenly wondered if there was another Basilisk wandering through the castle. That particular thought met with a chuckle of, refined feminine laughter that only he seemed capable of hearing, "Speak to me with your mind Mr. Potter.

Speaking aloud will only add to the rumors that flirt around you. There are a great many things that we need to discuss, some other time."But at a later time, walk softly and tread lightly, for the headmaster is not alone."

Hurrying through the gap in the walls, he stepped on to the foot of the spiral stone staircase and moved upwards, his companions in tow behind as the gargoyle slid back in to place. He stood before a polished oak door with a brass doorknocker and hesitated for a moment, remembering the words of the Lady of the Castle. He hesitated and listened, "Dumbledore, I'm afraid I don't see the connection, don't see it at all!" It was the voice of the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge. "Bertha was perfectly capable of getting herself lost. I agree we would have expected to find her by now, but all the same, we have no evidence of foul play, Dumbledore, none at all! As for her disappearance being linked with Barty Crouch's!"

"And what do you think happened to Barty Crouch, Minister?" said Moody's growling voice.

"I see two possibilities, Alastor," said Fudge. "Either Crouch has finally cracked - more than likely, I'm sure you'll agree, given his personal history - lost his mind, and gone wandering off somewhere -"

"He wandered extremely quickly, if that is the case, Cornelius," said Dumbledore calmly.

"Or else - well..." Fudge sounded embarrassed. "Well, I'll reserve judgment until after I've seen the place where he was found, just past the Beauxbatons carriage?"

"Can we wrap up this discussion?" growled Moody.

"Yes, yes, let's go down to the grounds, then," said Fudge impatiently.

"No, it's not that," said Moody, "it's just that Potter wants a word with you, Dumbledore. He's just outside the door, and he has company with him." The door of the office opened to reveal the grizzled veteran of the first war standing before him, "Hello, Potter," said Moody. "Come in, then."

Harry walked inside. He had been inside Dumbledore's office once before; it was a very beautiful, circular room, lined with pictures of previous headmasters and headmistresses of Hogwarts, all of whom were fast asleep, their chests rising and falling gently. There were a series of machines and other devices on spindly silver legs scattered on several shelves behind the desk. Cornelius Fudge was standing beside Dumbledore's desk, wearing his usual pinstriped cloak and holding his lime-green bowler hat. "Harry!" said Fudge jovially, moving forward. "How are you?"

"Fine," Harry lied.

"We were just talking about the night when Mr. Crouch turned up on the grounds," said Fudge. "It was you who found him, was it not?"

"Yes," said Harry. Then, feeling it was pointless to pretend that he had not overheard what they had been saying, he added, "I didn't see Madame Maxime anywhere, though, and she'd have a job hiding, wouldn't she?"

Dumbledore smiled at Harry behind Fudge's back, his eyes twinkling, "Yes, well," said Fudge, looking embarrassed, "we're about to go for a short walk on the grounds, Harry, if you'll excuse us... perhaps if you just go back to your class -"

"I wanted to talk to you. Professor," Harry said quickly, looking at Dumbledore, who gave the gathered trio a swift, searching look.

"Wait here for me, Harry," he said. "Our examination of the grounds will not take long." They trooped out in silence past him and closed the door. After a minute or so, Harry heard the clunks of Moody's wooden leg growing fainter in the corridor below.

"Hello, Fawkes," he said. Fawkes, Professor Dumbledore's phoenix, was standing on his golden perch beside the door. The size of a swan, with magnificent scarlet-and-gold plumage, he swished his long tail and blinked benignly at Harry.

Harry sat down in a chair in front of Dumbledore's desk. For several minutes, he sat and watched the old headmasters and headmistresses snoozing in their frames, thinking about what he had just heard, and running his fingers over his scar. It had stopped hurting for now. Nevertheless, he was sitting in the proverbial lion's

den. Harry looked up at the walls behind the desk. The patched and ragged Sorting Hat was standing on a shelf.

A glass case next to it held a magnificent silver sword with large rubies set into the hilt, which Harry recognized as the one he himself had pulled out of the Sorting Hat in his second year. The sword had once belonged to Godric Gryffindor, founder of Harry's House. He was gazing at it, remembering how it had come to his aid when he had thought all hope was lost, when he noticed a patch of silvery light, dancing and shimmering on the glass case. He looked around for the source and saw a sliver of silver-white light shining from a black cabinet with an improperly and possibly hastily latched door. Harry hesitated; Fawkes seemed to be studying Harry before politely turning around and gazing interestedly out a window.

"Curiosity must be exercised with great caution Harry," said Griphook softly, "There is no telling what may lie within." Blake, his godfather in disguise nodded in agreement. Harry had hit the crossroads and knew that the decision he made would be a critical one. Though he did not trust the headmaster, could he risk looking?

He pulled open the cabinet door.

A shallow stone basin lay there, with odd carvings around the edge: runes and symbols that Harry did not recognize. The silvery light was coming from the basin's contents, which were like nothing Harry had ever seen before. He could not tell whether the substance was liquid or gas. It was bright, whitish silver, and it was moving ceaselessly; the surface ruffled like water beneath wind, and then, like clouds, separated and swirled smoothly. It looked like light made liquid - or wind made solid - Harry could not make up his mind.

He wanted to touch it, to find out what it felt like, but nearly four years' experience of the magical world told him that sticking his hand into a bowl full of some unknown substance was a very stupid thing to do. He therefore pulled his wand out of the inside of his robes, cast a nervous look around the office, looked back at the contents of the basin, and prodded them.

The surface of the silvery stuff inside the basin began to swirl very fast. Harry bent closer, his head right inside the cabinet. The silvery substance had become transparent; it looked like glass. He looked down into it expecting to see the stone bottom of the basin - and

saw instead an enormous room below the surface of the mysterious substance, a room into which he seemed to be looking through a circular window in the ceiling.

The dimly lit room might have been underground, for there were no windows, merely torches in brackets such as the ones that illuminated the walls of Hogwarts. Lowering his face so that his nose was a mere inch away from the glassy substance, Harry saw that rows and rows of witches and wizards were seated around every wall on what seemed to be benches rising in levels. An empty chair stood in the very center of the room. Something about the chair that gave Harry an ominous feeling. Chains encircled the arms of it, as though its occupants were restrained as a matter of course.

Where was this place? It surely was not Hogwarts; he had never seen a room like that here in the castle. Moreover, the crowd in the mysterious room at the bottom of the basin was comprised of adults, and Harry knew there were not nearly that many teachers at Hogwarts. They seemed, he thought, to be waiting for something; even though he could only see the tops of their hats, all of their faces seemed to be pointing in one direction, and none of them were talking to one another.

"Pensieve," said Blake quietly, confirming what Harry suspected, "Looks like its Dumbledore's personal one too. Not sure if you want to go poking around inside that man's head..." Blake shrugged, "But there's no telling what you could learn..."

"If we somehow... copy the contents of the pensieve, would he know?" wondered Harry considering his options. He had several open to him now, "Griphook?"

"The contents of a pensieve are like an ocean," said Griphook, "there is no telling what memories you may extract, and how many complete memories you can recover. It is a matter of control, not power that determine the quality of what you retrieve. Though my understanding of such artifacts is limited, the containers to store the memories would have to be glass to prevent contamination or corruption of the memories themselves.

Blake had pulled his wand, "Transfiguration isn't really my strong suit..." Harry shook his head and reached in to the rubbish bin to pull several glass butterbeer bottles. Blake chuckled as Harry

cleaned the bottles with a quick wave of his wand, "Waste not, want not eh Harry?"

They worked quickly, siphoning the memories and depositing them in to the cleaned bottles. They quickly ran in to a problem: The bottles themselves, "The glass is impure," explained Griphook, "and the quality of the memories contained will degrade rapidly. They must be moved to another pensieve before they degrade.... We have at best several hours."

"At worst?" asked Harry. The answer made him shake his head, "It's never easy being me....," he thought with a self-deprecating laugh. Glass seemed to be against him: The impure material would corrode the memories within an hour.

When the headmaster reentered his office, he wore a calm, almost serene smile on his face as he sat down behind his desk and with a wave of his wand made the usual selection of cookies, cakes, and tea available to his guests. To his disappointment, all of his guests, refused and Harry got right to the point, "I was in divination just now and - er - I fell asleep," he hesitated for a split second before plowing ahead, "I had a dream, about Voldemort. He got a letter from an owl and said that Wormtail's blunder had been repaired, that someone was dead and that his Nagini would not dine on him, but on me instead. Then he started in with the Cruciatus Curse and that was when I woke up.

"I see," said Dumbledore quietly. "I see. Now, has your scar hurt at any other time this year, excepting the time it woke you up over the summer?"

"No, I - how did you know it woke me up over the summer?" said Harry, astonished.

"You are not Sirius's only correspondent," said Dumbledore. "Until recently, I was in contact with him when he suddenly cut all ties and simply vanished. I am concerned as to what may have happened to him...." The headmaster was not going to get anything by going on a fishing expedition as Harry let the silence extend for several minutes,

"Do you know why my scar's hurting me?" Dumbledore looked very intently at Harry for a moment, and realized that though the boy had

come in to his own in many ways, there was still things that he knew, that he did not. However that went both ways as for the first time in a few months, he successfully made and maintained eye contact. "I have a theory, no more than that." He had the undivided attention of the boy, the wizard and the Goblin and made his mental move, "It is my belief that your scar hurts both when Lord Voldemort is near you, and when he is feeling a particularly strong surge of hatred."

"But... why?" Harry was tired of getting information piecemeal, and having to beg for virtually every scrap, "This would work a lot better if you just told me what you know!" he thought to himself.

"Because you and he are connected by the curse that failed," said Dumbledore. "That is no ordinary scar."

"So you think... that dream... did it really happen?" he pressed.

"It is possible," said Dumbledore. "I would say - probable. Harry - did you see Voldemort?" He had found nothing of real interest, nothing he was not already aware of through his other source. He probed slightly deeper.

"No," said Harry. "Just the back of his chair. But - there wouldn't have been anything to see, would there? I mean, he doesn't have a body, has he? But... but then how could he have held the wand?" Harry said slowly.

"How indeed?" muttered Dumbledore. "How indeed..." Neither Dumbledore nor Harry spoke for a while. Dumbledore seemed to be gazing at Harry and the eye contact was slightly unnerving to him, but he met the characteristic, piercing look head on even though it made Harry feel as if the headmaster could see right through him, to every move he had ever made or planned. "Once again, I can only give you my suspicions." The headmaster hesitated. He now realized exactly how far along and how dangerous the young man was. He had gained a great deal of power - just how much he had dramatically underestimated. It was a relatively simple task for a master of Legilimency to balance a mental probe while carrying out a conversation, until something caught his attention... a memory that seemed shrouded, as if protected by something akin to a shield. He probed deeper.

Dumbledore sighed again, and he looked older, and wearier, than ever. "The years of Voldemort's ascent to power," he said, "were marked with disappearances. Bertha Jorkins has vanished without a trace in the place where Voldemort was certainly known to be last. Mr. Crouch too has disappeared... within these very grounds. There is also a third disappearance, one which the Ministry, I regret to say, do not consider of any importance, for it concerns a Muggle. His name was Frank Bryce, he lived in the village where Voldemort's father grew up, and has not been seen since last August. You see, I read the muggle..."

Suddenly, the headmaster cringed, visibly and Harry rose to his feet with a roar, "SON OF A BITCH!" screamed Harry his wand pointed, "I came here under a banner of good faith!" Harry struggled to maintain a grip on his emotions as Dumbledore's table vibrated violently, "How many times have you done that? And not just to me!" he realized with a shock, "How many other minds, how many other people have had the privacy of their mind violated! By you!" His wand was pointed at the headmaster's throat, "Hermione has been pushing for us to resolve our differences, and Merlin knows that I have tried, more than once. But every time, I let myself begin to hope, you do something to screw things up!"

To his credit, Dumbledore sat behind his desk and held his ground, wisely saying nothing, "Just this year alone, you've decided to use me as bait by letting me compete in this tournament!" He spat the last word the way Snape normally spat Harry's name, and that was the beginning of several minutes of verbal abuse and accusations that ranged from poor teaching and culminating in what was in Harry's eyes, most damning of all: "You've known my past, my parents, and kept my past hidden from me," he said quietly, almost sadly. "I once looked up to you, idolized you even, the great Albus Dumbledore," his wand pointed at the floor, "Do you see? Do you know how far you have fallen?"

Turning, Harry swept from the offices of the headmaster, leaving the aged wizard to his thoughts with a parting shot, "If I cannot trust you, can anyone else? Dare anyone else?"

Chapter 17

The Third Task

Perhaps Harry would have gained a great deal, perhaps not, but in any case, the memories they had retrieved from Dumbledore's pensieve were worthless. Their exposure to the less than pure glass of the Butterbeer bottles had left only many fragments that in isolation made little to no sense. They only served to raise more questions than answers.

He had viewed them, and had seen fragments of what appeared to be trials of suspected and actual death eaters from the first wizarding war and had seen enough to know that it was an icy fast and dark whirlpool that left more questions than answers, even if some of what he knew helped fill in the gaps. He sighed and went over again what he had learned from the fragments. The trial of Igor Karkaroff had revealed that Snape was a death eater who had changed sides early on in the war. Ludo Bagman had been accused and acquitted of being a Death Eater. Rita Skeeter had probably been the same mooching parasite back then.

Neville... he suddenly realized in some ways, Neville had it worse than him. At least for him, there was a sense of closure. His parents were dead. Neville could only wonder whether his parents would ever recover or just die in a state of permanent ignorance. That least damaged memory was the one that haunted Harry the most: The sight of Barty Crouch Junior pleading for his life as his father threw him to the Dementors and disowned him.

He had shared the information within only with Griphook, his godfather, and 'Mione. Together the four could come up with no reason to keep the memories and had destroyed them, after vowing to keep Neville's' secret. Their friend did deserve to tell them the truth, on his own whenever he was ready. He also realized that he had been something of a hypocrite, condemning the headmaster's actions when his own were, not exactly laudable where the pensieve was concerned. Though 'Mione had been the most difficult to persuade, she had agreed, to keep this as their secret.

Just as well. It was one less thing on Harry's mind as June 24 drew ever closer. He was nervous, but considering the first two tasks and that he had done something loosely similar during his first year, he

was if anything, more confident about this task. He had done everything he could to prepare and even if one of his friends won, the tournament would be over. That would be a relief in itself.

The morning of the third task, Harry sat surrounded by his friends at the Gryffindor Table. Conversation was quiet, almost muted. They all knew what was at stake that night and none seemed to care that their last exam of the year was later that morning. Then again, it was History of Magic was a bit of a joke as a class, and so was the exam. Some had joked that Binns had been teaching it for so long, he had forgotten most of what he was supposed to teach and just assigned grades to keep the students happy which in turn kept the parents and other professors in turn happy, allowing him to drone on in his usual mindless fashion.

"Potter, the champions are congregating in the chamber off the Hall after breakfast," said Professor McGonagall.

"But the task is not till tonight!" said Harry, already suspicious of something, and considering the events surrounding the second task, he had every right to be cautious.

"I'm aware of that, Potter," she said. "The champions' families are invited to watch the final task, you know. This is simply a chance for you to greet them." She moved away.

Harry stared at the retreating back of his Transfiguration Professor, wondering if she'd lost the plot, "She doesn't actually expect the Dursleys to turn up, does she?" he asked Mione blankly.

Though he would have done Mad Eye Moony proud with his paranoia, he saw Fleur get up from the Ravenclaw Table, along with Cedric, as they crossed to a side chamber and entered. A few moments later, Victor slouched off to join them. Harry hesitated; he had no family - no family that would turn up, wish him good luck, watch him risk life and pray he survived at any rate. Just as he was contemplating retreating to do a little training, Cedric stuck his head out, "Harry! Come on, they're waiting for you!"

Utterly perplexed Harry got up. The Dursleys could not possibly be here, could they? He walked across the Hall and opened the door into the chamber. Cedric and his parents were just inside the door. Viktor Krum was over in a corner, conversing with his dark-haired

mother and father in rapid Bulgarian. He had inherited his father's hooked nose. On the other side of the room, Fleur was jabbering away in French to her mother. Fleur's little sister, Gabrielle, was holding her mother's hand. She waved at Harry, who waved back with a smile. Then he saw Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and Bill Weasley standing in front of the fireplace. The parents were clearly on their guard, and the eldest sons, though more relaxed, wore expressions of cautious friendship.

"Surprise!" Mrs. Weasley said. He smiled and walked over to them, trying his best to keep things at least civil, even as he noted Ron skulking in a corner of the room, before departing quietly without making a scene, something he was thankful for at that moment, "Thought we'd come and watch!" She gave him a hug, and he returned it, making the hug a brief one.

"All right?" said Bill, grinning at Harry and shaking his hand. "Charlie wanted to come, but he couldn't get time off. He said you were incredible against the Horntail."

"This is really nice of you," Harry muttered to Mrs. Weasley. "I thought for a moment - the Dursleys -"

"Hmm," said Mrs. Weasley, pursing her lips. She had always refrained from criticizing the Dursleys in front of Harry, but her eyes flashed every time their name came up.

"It's great being back here," said Bill, looking around the chamber (Violet, the Fat Lady's friend, winked at him from her frame). "Haven't seen this place for five years. Is that picture of the mad knight still around? Sir Cadogan?"

"Oh yeah," said Harry, who had met Sir Cadogan the previous year, "Still as mad as a hatter."

"And the Fat Lady?" said Bill.

"She was here in my time," said Mrs. Weasley. "She gave me such a telling off one night when I got back to the dormitory at four in the morning -"

"What were you doing out of your dormitory at four in the morning?" said Bill, surveying his mother with amazement.

Mrs. Weasley grinned, her eyes twinkling. "Your father and I had been for a night time stroll," she said. "He got caught by Apollyon Pringle - he was the caretaker in those days - your father's still got the marks."

"Fancy giving us a tour, Harry?" said Bill.

"Yeah, okay," said Harry, and they made their way back toward the door into the Great Hall. As they passed Amos Diggory, he looked around.

"There you are, are you?" he said, looking Harry up and down. "Bet you're not feeling quite as full of yourself now Cedric's caught you up on points, are you?"

Harry was about to make a scathing remark, but it died on his lips at the apologetic glance from Cedric, "Ignore him," said Cedric in a low voice to Harry, frowning after his father. "He's been in a... mood ever since he found out that there were two Hogwarts Champions - even after you became Gringott's Champion he's still...." Cedric shrugged. He did not know what else he could say. Harry however, could relate, considering what his own "family."

"Still... you'll show him, Ced." said Amos Diggory, loudly enough for Harry to hear as he started to walk out of the door, "Beaten him once before, haven't you?"

"Rita Skeeter goes out of her way to cause trouble, Amos!" Mr. Weasley said angrily. "I would have thought you'd know that, working at the Ministry!"

Mr. Diggory looked as though he was going to say something angry, but his wife laid a hand on his arm, and he merely shrugged and turned away.

Harry had a very enjoyable morning walking over the sunny grounds with Bill and Mrs. Weasley, showing them the Beauxbatons carriage and the Durmstrang ship. Mrs. Weasley was intrigued by the Whomping Willow that was planted after she had left school, and reminisced at length about the gamekeeper before Hagrid, a man called Ogg.

"How's Percy?" Harry asked as they walked around the greenhouses.

"Not good," said Bill.

"He's very upset," said Mr. Weasley, lowering her voice and glancing around. "The Ministry wants to keep Mr. Crouch's disappearance quiet, but Percy's been hauled in for questioning about the instructions Mr. Crouch has been sending in. They seem to think there's a chance they weren't genuinely written by him. Percy's been under a lot of strain. Madame Umbridge will be filling in as the fourth judge again."

They returned to the castle for lunch and were seated at the Gryffindor Table, surrounded by laughing friends, free at last after their final exam. ". How was your exam?" asked Molly, giving Ron a certain look, reserved specially for examination enquiries.

"Oh... okay," said Ron. "Couldn't remember all the goblin rebels' names, so I invented a few. It's all right," he said, helping himself to a Cornish pasty, while Mrs. Weasley alternated between looking worried and stern, "they're all called stuff like Bodrod the Bearded and Urg the Unclean; it wasn't hard."

Though she had heard that her youngest son and Harry were at odds, she was shocked at just how far apart the two had grown. They would not make eye contact, and could not even maintain polite, civil conversation with each other. Where Hermione used to be something, or rather someone that could keep them together, she was with Harry now.

Ron, to her surprise and shock, had quickly excused himself from the Gryffindor Table to join the Slytherins, where he sat alongside Draco, Pansy, and Daphne, amongst others. Though her eyes wandered the length and breadth of the great hall, her gaze kept returning to Ron, seemingly without a friend in his own house. She had promised herself, promised her husband that she would not interfere, but no parent can sit idly by at such a sight. She approached the laughing group that to her surprised included Luna Lovegood, amongst others, "Harry, could I have a few minutes?"

The smile and laughter vanished in that instant, replaced by something else that reminded Molly of a Goblin's professional

demeanor, "Of course, Mrs. Weasley." He did not attempt to move away from his friends, who to their credit carried on as if they were not waiting for the upcoming exchange. Harry beat her to the punch, "I am quite sure, that this is about Ron." Molly blinked, taken aback by the blunt directness, "You have I'm sure received a letter from Professor McGonagall, detailing what happened just after Halloween," he said, "He has never apologized for that. He apologized for not believing that I had not put my name in the Goblet of Fire, but not for the screaming and the, attempting hexing..."

Harry hesitated for a moment, "You have seen the inside of my Gringotts Vault," She nodded, uncertain where this was going. "So it makes no sense for me to risk my life over a thousand galleons." Not to mention that his family vault made his trust vault look like a picnic basket.

Molly Weasley was speechless, and then her own children drove nails in to Ron's coffin, "Mum, we tried talking to Ron...." began Fred

"...but listening has never been his strong suit..." said George.

"...and he blew us both off, and did the same to Ginny." concluded Fred.

"We tried," said Ginny, quietly, "We tried really hard. He drifted away from more than his friends mum," she gestured towards the Slytherin Table, "He left his house. We didn't make him leave." She was staring at her brother, seated with his back to them, "He found new friends... and never had time for us after that."

"I'm sorry Harry," Mrs. Weasley had no idea what else she could say, "If you like, I could..."

"Don't waste your time on my account," interrupted Harry, "I have tried, and I am tired of trying. After three years of difficulties, I don't know if he doesn't understand or he just refuses to understand what it is that destroyed our friendship. Please understand Mrs. Weasley, and I do not condemn everyone just because of the actions of one person. I'm proud to say that three of your children," he indicated the Prank Master Generals and the general in training with a wave of his hand, "as being amongst my closest friends."

Molly quietly retreated. She shook her head and sighed as she looked at the membership of the alleged "Honor Guard" of Harry Potter: Two of her sons, her only daughter, Luna Lovegood, Colin Creevey, and Neville Longbottom. The only ones missing it seemed, were the Tournaments other three champions. These friendships would go beyond the walls of the castle and see them through the trials and challenges of life. Ron could have been a part of this. And he threw it all away.

With Fred, George, and Ginny sitting next to him, Harry was having such a good time he felt almost as though he were back at the Burrow; he had forgotten to worry about that evening's task. The afternoon passed leisurely enough, spent by the lake, enjoying the sunny weather. He slipped away for a few minutes before the evening feast but was back amongst his friends before anyone noticed he had left.

The judges were gathered at the staff table, and were joined by Cornelius Fudge. There were more courses than usual, but Harry didn't eat much as the enchanted ceiling began to fade from blue to a dusky purple. Dumbledore rose to his feet at the staff table and silence fell, "Ladies and gentlemen, in five minutes' time, I will be asking you to make your way down to the Quidditch field for the third and final task of the Triwizard Tournament. Will the champions please follow Mr. Bagman down to the stadium now?"

Harry rose and the Gryffindor table exploded with applause: his friends gave him brief hugs and all wished him luck. The twins planted kisses, one on each cheek. The mood was light, happy even as everyone burst out laughing. Hermione held him for a lot longer than could be considered appropriate and kissed him soundly, drawing a few playful catcalls and wolf whistles from around the hall. Finally, he headed out of the Great Hall with Cedric, Fleur, and Viktor.

"Feeling all right Harry?" Bagman asked as they went down the stone steps onto the grounds. "Confident?"

"I'm okay," said Harry. It was somewhat true; he was nervous, but he kept running over all the hexes and spells he had been practicing in his mind as they walked, and the knowledge that he could remember them all made him feel better.

They walked onto the Quidditch field, which was now completely unrecognizable. A twenty-foot-high hedge ran all the way around the edge of it. There was a gap right in front of them: the entrance to the vast maze. The passage looked dark and to be honest, slightly creepy.

Five minutes later, the stands had begun to fill; the air was full of excited voices and the rumbling of feet as the hundreds of students filed into their seats. The sky was a deep, clear blue and the first stars were starting to appear. Hagrid, Professor Moody, Professor McGonagall, and Professor Flitwick came walking into the stadium, approached Bagman, and the champions. They were wearing large, red, luminous stars on their hats, all except Hagrid, who had his on the back of his moleskin vest.

"We are going to be patrolling the outside of the maze," said Professor McGonagall to the champions. "If you get into difficulty, and wish to be rescued, send red sparks into the air, and one of us will come and get you, do you understand?"

The champions nodded. "Off you go, then!" said Bagman brightly to the four patrollers.

"Good luck. Harry," Hagrid whispered, and the four of them walked away in different directions, to station themselves around the maze. Bagman now pointed his wand at his throat, muttered, "Sonorous," and his magically magnified voice echoed into the stands. "Ladies and gentlemen, the third and final task of the Triwizard Tournament is about to begin! Let me remind you how the points currently stand! Tied in first place, with eighty-five points each - Champion Diggory of Hogwarts, and Champion Potter of Gringotts!" The cheers and applause sent birds from the Forbidden Forest fluttering into the darkening sky. "In second place, with eighty points: Champion Krum of Durmstrang!" More applause "And in third place – Champion Delacour of Beauxbatons!"

"So... on my whistle, Harry and Cedric!" said Bagman. "Three - two - one -"

He gave a short blast on his whistle, and Harry and Cedric hurried forward into the maze.

The towering hedges cast black shadows and the sound of the surrounding crowd vanished. Harry felt almost as though he were underwater again. After about fifty yards, they reached a fork. They looked at each other.

"See you," Harry said. The friends shook hands and he took the left one, while Cedric took the right.

Wand in hand, he cast his first spell of the task, "Lumos Maxima!" the ball of light was a beacon in the darkness and lit up the passage ten feet forwards and backwards. He picked up the pace as Bagman's whistle blew a second time: Krum had entered the maze. His chosen path seemed completely deserted. He turned right, and hurried on. Bagman's whistle blew in the distance for the third time. All of the champions were now inside.

Harry kept looking behind him. The old feeling that he was being watched was upon him. The maze was growing darker with every passing minute as the sky overhead deepened to navy. He reached a second fork, "Point Me," he whispered to his wand, holding it flat in his palm.

The wand spun around once and pointed toward his right, into solid hedge. That way was north, and he knew that he needed to go northwest for the center of the maze. The best he could do was to take the left fork and go right again as soon as possible.

The path ahead was empty too, and when Harry reached a right turn and took it, he again found his way unblocked. Harry did not know why, but the lack of obstacles was unnerving him. Surely, he should have met something by now.

It felt as though the maze were luring him into a false sense of security. Then he heard movement right behind him. He held out his wand, ready to attack, but its beam fell only upon Cedric, who had just hurried out of a path on the right-hand side. Cedric looked severely shaken. The sleeve of his robe was smoking.

"Hagrid's Blast-Ended Skrewts!" he hissed. "They're enormous - I only just got away!" He shook his head and dived out of sight, along another path. Keen to put plenty of distance between him and the skrewts, Harry hurried off again. Then, as he turned a corner, he saw... a Dementor gliding toward him. Twelve feet tall, its face

hidden by its hood, its rotting, scabbed hands outstretched, it advanced, sensing its way blindly toward him. Harry could hear its rattling breath; he felt clammy coldness stealing over him, but knew what he had to do...

He summoned the happiest thought he could, concentrated with all his might on the thought of getting out of the maze and celebrating with Ron and Hermione, raised his wand, and cried, "Expecto Patronum!" A silver stag erupted from the end of Harry's wand and galloped toward the Dementor, which fell back and tripped over the hem of its robes... Harry had never seen a Dementor stumble. "Hang on!" he shouted, advancing in the wake of his silver Patronus, "You're a boggart! Riddikulus!"

There was a loud crack, and the shape-shifter exploded in a wisp of smoke. The silver stag faded from sight. Harry wished it could have stayed, he could have used some company... but he moved on, quickly and quietly as possible, listening hard, his wand held high once more.

Left... right... left again... Twice he found himself facing dead ends. He did the Four-Point Spell again and found that he was going too far east. He turned back, took a right turn, and saw an odd golden mist floating ahead of him. Harry approached it cautiously, pointing the wand's beam at it. This looked like some kind of enchantment. He wondered whether he might be able to blast it out of the way. "Reducto!"

The spell shot straight through the mist, leaving it intact. He supposed he should have known better; the Reductor Curse was for solid objects. What would happen if he walked through the mist? Was it worth chancing it, or should he double back?

He was still hesitating when a scream shattered the silence.

"Fleur?" Harry yelled.

There was silence. He stared all around him. What had happened to her? Her scream seemed to have come from somewhere ahead. He took a deep breath and ran through the enchanted mist.

The world turned upside down. Harry was hanging from the ground, with his hair on end, his glasses dangling off his nose, threatening to

fall into the bottomless sky. He clutched them to the end of his nose and hung there, terrified. It felt as though his feet were glued to the grass, which had now become the ceiling. Below him, the dark, star-spangled heavens stretched endlessly. He felt as though if he tried to move one of his feet, he would fall away from the earth completely.

Think, he told himself, as all the blood rushed to his head, think... However, not one of the spells he had learned was designed to combat a sudden reversal of ground and sky. Did he dare move his foot? He could hear the blood pounding in his ears. Two choices: Try to move, or send up red sparks, get rescued and disqualified from the task.

He shut his eyes, so he would not be able to see the view of endless space below him, and pulled his right foot as hard as he could away from the grassy ceiling.

Immediately, the world righted itself. Harry fell forward onto his knees onto the wonderfully solid ground. He felt temporarily limp with shock. He took a deep, steadying breath, then got up again and hurried forward, looking back over his shoulder as he ran away from the golden mist, which twinkled innocently at him in the moonlight.

The cup was somewhere close by, and he met nothing for a further ten minutes but kept running in to dead ends. He took the same wrong turn twice and then found a new route and started to jog along it, his shadow flicker and distort on the hedge walls.

Then he rounded another corner and found himself facing a Blast-Ended Skrewt. Cedric was right - it was enormous. Ten feet long, it looked more like a giant scorpion with its long sting curled over its back. Its thick armor glinted in the light from the glowing orb Harry had cast earlier. "Stupefy!"

The spell hit the skrewt's armor and rebounded; Harry ducked just in time, but could smell burning hair; it had singed the top of his head. The skrewt issued a blast of fire from its end and flew forward toward him.

"Impedimenta!" Harry yelled. The spell hit the skrewt's armor again and ricocheted off; Harry staggered back a few paces and fell over. The Skrewt was inches from him, "Wingardium Leviosa!" He flew up,

over the gnashing claws. Casting a hover charm on himself, Harry unleashed his counter to the creatures' claws and stinger: "Confringo Maxima! Reducto Plurios!" The monster shrieked, as its shell cracked and splintered. The second curse blasted a gaping wound in its flank. It shrieked, an ear rending sound as it retreated, with the knowledge that it had bitten off more than it could chew.

He took a left path and hit a dead end, a right, and hit another; forcing himself to stop, heart hammering, he performed the Four-Point Spell again, backtracked, and chose a path that would take him northwest. He had been hurrying along the new path for a few minutes, when he heard something in the path running parallel to his own that made him stop dead.

"What are you doing?" yelled Cedric's voice. "What the hell d'you think you're doing?"

Then Harry heard Krum's voice, "Crucio!"

The air was suddenly full of Cedric's yells. He studied the hedge for an instant, "Caries morior!" The spell was borderline dark magic, depending on whom you asked about it. Griphook had deemed it necessary for Harry to learn such spells, and the young man was grateful that he had not had to use it on a human. The hedge demonstrated the spell's ability well enough as a three foot section of it dried, withered and crumbled in to a mess of branches and brown leaves.

Though Viktor held his wand outstretched and held Cedric under the Cruciatus curse, it was clear that the Bulgarian was fighting the effects of the Imperious Curse, and loosing. "Stupefy Maximus!"

The spell struck Krum and flipped him over, landing him on his face in the grass. Harry dashed over to Cedric, who had stopped twitching and was lying there panting, his hands over his face. "Are you all right?" Harry said roughly, grabbing Cedric's arm.

"Yeah," panted Cedric. "Yeah... I do not believe it... he crept up behind me... I heard him, I turned around, and he had his wand on me... but it took him too long to cast the..." Cedric got up. He was still shaking. He and Harry looked down at Krum.

"Somebody," said Harry grimly, "really doesn't want you to win. He met Cedric's gaze for a moment, "Did you hear Fleur scream earlier?"

"Yeah," said Cedric. "You think whoever controlling Victor was... got him... to..."

"I don't know," said Harry slowly, "I reckon we should send up red sparks. Someone will come and collect him... otherwise he'll probably be eaten by a skrewt." He raised his wand and shot a shower of red sparks into the air, which hovered high above Krum, marking the spot where he lay. Harry and Cedric stood there in the darkness for a moment, looking around them.

Then Cedric said, "Well... I s'pose we'd better go on..."

"What?" said Harry, "Oh... yeah... right..." It was an odd moment. Now the fact that they were opponents came back to Harry. The two of them proceeded up the dark path without speaking, and then Harry turned left and Cedric right.

Cedric's footsteps soon died away.

Harry moved on, continuing to use the Four-Point Spell, making sure he was moving in the right direction. It was between him and Cedric now. His desire to reach the cup first was now burning stronger than ever... Harry sped up.

Every so often, he hit more dead ends, but the increasing darkness made him feel sure he was getting near the heart of the maze. Then, as he strode down a long, straight path, he saw movement once again, and illuminated an extraordinary creature, one that he had only seen in picture form, in his Monster Book of Monsters.

It was a sphinx. It had the body of an over-large lion: great-clawed paws and a long yellowish tail ending in a brown tuft. Its head, however, was that of a woman. She turned her long, almond-shaped eyes upon Harry as he approached. He raised his wand, hesitating. She was not crouching as if to spring, but pacing from side to side of the path, blocking his progress. Then she spoke, in a deep, hoarse voice. "You are very near your goal. The quickest way is past me."

"So... so will you move, please?" said Harry, knowing what the answer was going to be.

"No," she said, continuing to pace. "Not unless you can answer my riddle. Answer on your first guess - I let you pass. Answer wrongly - I attack. Remain silent – I will let you walk away from me unscathed."

Harry's stomach slipped several notches. Hermione was good at this sort of thing. Not him. He weighed his chances. If the riddle was too hard, he could keep silent, get away from the sphinx unharmed, and try to find an alternative route to the center. "Okay," he said. "Can I hear the riddle?"

The sphinx sat down upon her hind legs, in the very middle of the path, and recited:

"First think of the person who lives in disguise,

Who deals in secrets and tells naught but lies.

Next, tell me what's always the last thing to mend,

The middle of middle and end of the end?

And finally give me the sound often heard

During the search for a hard-to-find word.

Now string them together, and answer me this,

Which creature would you be unwilling to kiss?"

Though he was no puzzle solver or mastermind, he had nothing to lose by taking a shot at the riddle. He began by treating it as he would an ancient runes puzzle. The sphinx repeated the riddle as Harry wrote it out with his wand. Then he sectioned the riddle in to four parts. The first three pairs of lines were clues. The last was an instruction on how to solve the riddle.

Studying the first two lines, Harry immediately thought of the muggle action and spy movies his cousins used to watch... James something or other: Spy. He wrote that out next to the two lines with

a question mark. He could come back to that later. The Sphinx sat up.

The next clue was baffling: There was no reference to anything, anything at all. The last clue was equally bizarre. A sound, hard to find word, "Er... that could be anything," said Harry thinking aloud. The Sphinx smiled and Harry blinked, "Er!" he wrote that out as well.

"Spy....something...er" he muttered, going back to the second clue, "Last thing to mend, middle of middle, end of the end..." he suddenly remembered something Luna had once said to him about Ancient Runes, about how the ancient's tended to write things in a very literal fashion. A wave of his wand pulled out a number of words, it fit. The last thing in the word mend was the letter "d" and it was the middle letter in "middle" and the last letter in "end." "Spy...d...er..." Harry turned to face his question posing adversary, "I would be unwilling to kiss a spider!"

The sphinx smiled more broadly. She got up, stretched her front legs, and then moved aside for him to pass. "Thanks!" said Harry, and, amazed at his own brilliance, he dashed forward. He had to be close now he had to be... His wand was telling him he was bang on course; as long as he didn't meet anything too horrible, he might have a chance... Harry broke into a run. He had a choice of paths up ahead. "Point Me!" he whispered again to his wand, and it spun around and pointed him to the right-hand one. He dashed up this one and saw light ahead.

The Triwizard Cup was gleaming on a plinth a hundred yards away. Suddenly a dark figure hurtled out onto the path in front of him. Cedric was going to get there first. Cedric was sprinting as fast as he could toward the cup, and Harry knew he would never catch up, Cedric was much taller, had much longer legs -

Then Harry saw something immense over a hedge to his left, moving quickly along a path that intersected with his own; it was moving so fast Cedric was about to run into it, and Cedric, his eyes on the cup, had not seen it, "Cedric!" Harry bellowed, "Contact left!"

Cedric looked around just in time to hurl himself past the thing and avoid colliding with it, but in his haste, he tripped. Harry saw Cedric's wand fly out of his hand as a gigantic spider stepped into the path and began to bear down upon Cedric.

"Stupefy!" Harry yelled; the spell hit the spider's gigantic, hairy black body, but for all the good it did, he might as well have thrown a stone at it; the spider jerked, scuttled around, and ran at Harry instead. "Stupefy! Impedimenta! Stupefy Maximus!" However, it was no use - the spider was either so large, or so magical, that the spells were doing no more than aggravating it. Harry had one horrifying glimpse of eight shining black eyes and razor-sharp pincers before it was upon him.

He was lifted into the air in its front legs; struggling madly, he tried to kick it; his leg connected with the pincers and next moment he was in some pain. He could hear Cedric yelling "Stupefy!" too, but his spell had no more effect than Harry's did - Harry raised his wand, "Expelliarmus!"

It worked - the Disarming Spell made the spider drop him, but that meant that Harry fell twelve feet onto his already injured leg, which crumpled beneath him. Without pausing to think, he aimed high at the spider's underbelly, "Bombarda Maximus! Confringo Maximus! Lancera!" The spell chain was one of Flitwick's own designed to break cover, force the opponent in to the open, and then end a duel. The remains of the spider keeled over sideways, flattening a nearby hedge, and strewing the path with bloody entrails.

"Harry!" he heard Cedric shouting. "You all right? Did it fall on you?"

"Yes and no." Harry called back, panting. He looked down at his leg. It was bleeding freely. He could see some thick, gluey secretion from the spider's pincers on the scratched dragon hide armor he had worn beneath his robes. He tried to get up, but his leg was shaking badly and did not want to support his weight. He leaned against the hedge, gasping for breath, and looked around as he cast a series of quick healing charms.

Cedric was standing feet from the Triwizard Cup, which was gleaming behind him. He set about dealing with his gashed leg just as Blake had taught him so recently. "Take it, then," Harry panted to Cedric. "Go on, take it. You're there."

Cedric did not move. He merely stood there, looking at Harry. Then he turned to stare at the cup. Harry saw the longing expression on his face in its golden light. Cedric looked around at Harry again, who

was now holding onto the hedge as he healed the edges of the gash. Cedric took a deep breath, "You take it. You should win. That's twice you've saved my neck in here."

"That's not how it's supposed to work," Harry said, "The one who reaches the cup first gets the points. That's you"

Cedric took a few paces nearer to the deceased spider, away from the cup, shaking his head, "No," he said.

"Stop being noble," said Harry irritably. "Just take it! Then we can both get the hell out of here."

Cedric stepped over the spiders tangled legs to join Harry, who stared at him. Cedric was serious. He was walking away from the sort of glory Hufflepuff House had not had in centuries. "Go on." He looked as though this was costing him every ounce of resolution he had, but his face was set, his arms were folded, he seemed decided. Harry looked from Cedric to the cup. For one shining moment, he saw himself emerging from the maze, holding it. He saw himself holding the Triwizard Cup aloft, heard the roar of the crowd, saw Hermione's face shining with admiration, more clearly than he had ever seen it before... and then the picture faded, and he found himself staring at Cedric's shadowy, stubborn face.

"Both of us," Harry said suddenly, "We'll take it at the same time. We'll tie for it."

Cedric stared at Harry. He unfolded his arms, "You - you sure?"

"Yeah," said Harry. "Yeah... we've helped each other out, haven't we? We both got here. Let's just take it together."

For a moment, Cedric looked as though he could not believe his ears; then his face split in a grin. "You're on," he said.

When they had reached it, they both held a hand out over one of the cup's gleaming handles, "On three, right?" said Harry. "One - two - three!" He and Cedric both grasped a handle.

Instantly, Harry felt a jerk somewhere behind his navel. His feet had left the ground. He could not unclench the hand holding the

Triwizard Cup; it was pulling him onward in a howl of wind and swirling color, Cedric at his side.

Harry opened his eyes to find himself and Cedric standing on a raised dais, the stands filled with people cheering. The judges and the minister were seated behind a table just off to the side. Dumbledore was clapping politely as were the rest of the judges except for Karkaroff who had stormed angrily away. The minister was smiling and applauding as well and no doubt thinking of a way to turn the victory to his own advantage.

Cedric turned to stare at the crowd and Harry chose that moment to act, "You," he said to Cedric, "wanted in this tournament, and you wanted to win," Cedric blinked in confusion and turned to find that Harry had sidestepped off the podium leaving Cedric in first place. "Champion Cedric Diggory of Hogwarts!" shouted Harry, "Beat me to the cup by inches! Your Champion!"

"Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you the winner of the 1994 Triwizard Tournament: Champion Cedric Diggory of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry!" The cheering in the stands reached a fever pitch. "To present the awards: Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge!" Minister Fudge stood and waved to the crowd as he walked up to Cedric, smiled and shook his hand. Then he cast a sonorous charm and turned to the crowd.

"As Minister for Magic of Britain, it is my duty to present Cedric Diggory with one thousand galleons," he said turning to Cedric as he placed the heavy bag in to Cedric's hands, and then pinned a heavy golden medal to Cedric's robes. Harry smiled from the sidelines, shaking his head as Cedric tried desperately to communicate with his eyes that Harry should be up here alongside him.

There was the clicking of a camera as Colin went to work, recording the event for posterity, until Cedric waved to Harry, "Come on up here!" called the champion of champions, wearing a large smile, "Both of you!" Harry looked at 'mione and she shrugged: Why not?

Standing alongside Cedric, Harry helped him hoist the cup in to the air, his free arm wrapped around his girlfriend's waist. The three of them were all smiles.

"Mordsmorde!"

All hell broke loose as the sky overhead darkened. The clouds, twisted by magic formed the screaming skull with its black snake tongue. Voldemort's mark emblazoned across the skies. The medal pinned to Cedric's chest glowed a deep purple for an instant and then there was the familiar sensation of a hook behind the navel, the sound of rushing wind and the three were pulled from Hogwarts.

Pandemonium ensued.

Chapter 18

Rebirth and Death

Harry felt his feet slam into the ground and he fell forward. His hand let go of the Triwizard Cup and Cedric did the same. The cup tumbled down the slope. He raised his head, "Where are we?" Harry said.

Cedric shook his head. He got up, pulled the couple to their feet and they looked around. They had left the Hogwarts grounds completely; they had obviously traveled miles - perhaps hundreds of miles - for even the mountains surrounding the castle were gone. They were standing instead in a dark and overgrown graveyard; the black outline of a small church was visible beyond a large yew tree to their right. A hill rose above them to their left. Harry could just make out the outline of a fine old house on the hillside.

Cedric tore the medal from his chest, taking a small portion of his robes with them, "I'm guessing this isn't a fourth task is it?" He was looking around the graveyard. It was completely silent and slightly eerie. The trio stood with their wands drawn. Harry kept looking around him. He had, yet again, the strange feeling that they were being watched.

"Contact forward!" Hermione said suddenly.

Squinting tensely through the darkness, they watched the figure drawing nearer, walking steadily toward them between the graves. Harry could not make out a face, but from the way it was walking and holding its arms, he could tell that it was carrying something. Whoever it was, he was short, and wearing a hooded cloak pulled up over his head to obscure his face. Harry saw that the thing in the person's arms looked like a baby... or a bundle of robes.

A sixth sense screamed when the figure stopped. Harry advanced, raising his wand to cast when his scar exploded with pain. He had never felt an agony like this in all his life. His wand slipped from his fingers as he put his hands over his face. His knees buckled, and he hit the ground, unable to see as his head threatened to split open.

"Cover him!" shouted Cedric to Hermione. He went on the offensive.

The figure dodged nimbly to the left of the blasting hex and let his shield absorb the cutting curse and retaliated, "Avada Kedavra!" screamed the short, hunched figure. Paralyzed with pain, Harry could only watch as the bolt of green light leapt from wand tip, on a crash course with Hermione.

Cedric Diggory, prefect of Hufflepuff House, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, was sorted in to the wrong house. The seventeen-year-old wizard grabbed her, spun them round and pushed her back. The blast of green magic caught Cedric square between the shoulder blades, and he went limp. Cedric's dead weight struck Hermione like a sledgehammer and dragged her down, pinning her beneath him.

For a second that contained an eternity, Harry stared into Cedric's face, at his open gray eyes, blank and expressionless as the windows of a deserted house, at his half-open mouth, which had a slight smile, almost as if he knew the price of what he was doing, and didn't mind paying for it. Before Harry's mind had accepted what he was seeing there was a flash of red, a stunning spell and Hermione went limp. Before he could feel anything but numb disbelief, he felt himself being pulled to his feet.

The short man in the cloak had put down his bundle, lit his wand, and was dragging Harry toward the marble headstone. Dazed with pain, Harry could put up no resistance as whoever he was stripped the arm guards and torso sections of the goblin made armor from him. Harry saw the name upon it flickering in the wand light before he was forced around and slammed against the headstone:

TOM RIDDLE

The cloaked man was now conjuring tight cords around Harry, tying him from neck to ankles to the headstone. Harry could hear shallow, fast breathing from the depths of the hood; he struggled, and the man hit him - hit him with a hand that had a finger missing: Wormtail. "You!" he gasped.

However, Wormtail, who had finished conjuring the ropes, did not reply; he was busy checking the tightness of the cords, his fingers trembling uncontrollably, rumbling over the knots. Once sure that Harry was bound so tightly to the headstone that he could not move an inch, Wormtail did the same to Hermione. Then, without a word,

he turned from Harry and hurried away. Harry could not see where Wormtail had gone; he could not turn his head to see beyond the headstone; he could see only what was right in front of him.

Cedric's body was lying some twenty feet away. Some way beyond him, glinting in the starlight, lay the Triwizard Cup. Harry's wand was on the ground at Cedric's feet. The bundle of robes that Harry had thought was a baby was close by, at the foot of the grave. It seemed to be stirring fretfully. Harry watched it, and his scar seared with pain again... and he suddenly knew that he did not want to see what was in those robes... he did not want that bundle opened...

He could hear noises at his feet. He looked down and saw a gigantic snake slithering through the grass, circling around his feet. Wormtail's fast, wheezy breathing was growing louder again. It sounded as though he was forcing something heavy across the ground. Then he came back within Harry's range of vision, and Harry saw him pushing a stone cauldron to the foot of the grave. It was full of what seemed to be water - Harry could hear it slopping around - and it was larger than any cauldron Harry had ever used; a great stone belly large enough for a full-grown man to sit in.

The thing inside the bundle of robes on the ground was stirring more persistently, as though it was trying to free itself. Now Wormtail was busying himself at the bottom of the cauldron with a wand. Suddenly there were crackling flames beneath it. The large snake slithered away into the darkness. The liquid in the cauldron seemed to heat very fast. The surface began not only to bubble, but also to send out fiery sparks, as though it were on fire. Steam was thickening, blurring the outline of Wormtail tending the fire. The movements beneath the robes became more agitated. Harry heard the high, cold voice again. "Hurry!"

The whole surface of the water was alight with sparks as if encrusted with diamonds. "It is ready Master."

"Now..." said the cold voice.

Wormtail pulled open the robes on the ground and Harry let out a yell.

Wormtail was speaking. His voice shook; he seemed frightened beyond his wits. He raised his wand, closed his eyes, and spoke to

the night. "Bone of the father, unknowingly given, you will renew your son!"

The surface of the grave at Harry's feet cracked. Horrified, Harry watched as a fine trickle of dust rose into the air at Wormtail's command and fell softly into the cauldron. The diamond surface of the water broke and hissed; it sent sparks in all directions and turned a vivid, poisonous-looking blue. Wormtail was whimpering. He pulled a long, thin, shining silver dagger from inside his cloak. His voice broke into petrified sobs. "Flesh - of the servant - willingly given - you will - revive - your master."

"Peter!" gasped Harry, "Please! You don't have to do this!"

He looked at the two bound teens, and he met Harry's gaze for the first time. Harry could see the emotion, the pain, the hurt, the loss, the sorrow, and loneliness in those empty eyes, "I have no choice," whispered Peter Pettigrew, "Your article in the Quibbler, means that leaving his side will mean I will be hunted forever."

He stretched his right hand out in front of him - the hand with the missing finger. He gripped the dagger very tightly in his left hand and swung it upward. Harry realized what Wormtail was about to do a second before it happened – he closed his eyes as tightly as he could, but he could not block the scream that pierced the night, that went through Harry as though he had been stabbed. He heard something fall to the ground, heard Wormtail's anguished panting, and then a sickening splash, as something was dropped into the cauldron. Harry could not stand to look... but the potion had turned a burning red; the light of it shone through closed eyelids...

Wormtail was gasping and moaning with agony. Not until Harry felt Wormtail's anguished breath on his face did he realize that Wormtail was right in front of him.

"Use the blood from both of them! The blood of the wizard who defied me! And the blood of his love! It will strengthen me even further!" The voice came from nowhere and everywhere at once, but Harry knew whom it belonged to now: Voldemort.

"B-blood of the enemies... forcibly taken... you will... resurrect your foe." Squinting down, struggling hopelessly at the ropes binding him, he saw the shining silver dagger shaking in Wormtail's remaining

hand. He felt its point penetrate the crook of his right arm between the forearm guard and the cuirass. Blood seeping down the sleeve of his torn robes. Wormtail, still panting with pain, rumbled in his pocket for a glass vial and held it to Harry's cut, so that a dribble of blood fell into it. Hermione awoke with a scream when Wormtail cut her across the forearm and collected a trickle of her blood. He poured it inside. The liquid within turned, instantly, a blinding white. Wormtail, his job done, dropped to his knees beside the cauldron, then slumped sideways and lay on the ground, cradling the bleeding stump of his arm, gasping and sobbing.

The cauldron was simmering, sending its diamond sparks in all directions, so blindingly bright that it turned all else to velvety blackness. Nothing happened...

"Let it have drowned," Harry thought, "let it have gone wrong," And then, suddenly, the sparks emanating from the cauldron winked out. A surge of white steam billowed thickly from the cauldron instead, obliterating everything in front of Harry, so that he could not see Wormtail or Cedric or anything but vapor hanging in the air. "It's gone wrong, he thought... it's drowned... please... please let it be dead."

Through the mist in front of him, he saw, with an icy surge of terror, the dark outline of a man, tall and skeletally thin, rising slowly from inside the cauldron. "Robe me," said the high, cold voice from behind the steam, and Wormtail, sobbing and moaning, still cradling his mutilated arm, scrambled to pick up the black robes from the ground, got to his feet, reached up, and pulled them one handed over his master's head.

The thin man stepped out of the cauldron, staring at Harry... and Harry stared back into the face that would haunted his nightmares. Whiter than a skull, with wide, livid scarlet eyes and a nose that was flat and snake like with slits for nostrils...

Voldemort looked away from Harry and began examining his own body. His hands were like large, pale spiders; his long white fingers caressed his own chest, his arms, his face; the red eyes, whose pupils were slits, like a cats, gleamed still more brightly through the darkness. He held up his hands and flexed the fingers, his expression rapt and exultant. Voldemort took not the slightest notice of Wormtail, twitching and bleeding on the ground, nor of the great

snake, which had slithered back into sight and was circling Harry again, hissing. Voldemort slipped one of those unnaturally long-fingered hands into a deep pocket and drew out a wand. He caressed it gently and Voldemort turned his scarlet eyes upon Harry, laughing a high, cold, mirthless laugh.

Wormtail's robes were shining with blood now; he had wrapped the stump of his arm in them. "My Lord..." he choked, "my Lord... you promised... you did promise..."

"Hold out your arm," said Voldemort lazily. He extended the bleeding stump, but Voldemort laughed again. "The other arm, Wormtail."

"Master, please... please..."

Voldemort bent down and pulled out Wormtail's left arm; he forced the sleeve of Wormtail's robes up past his elbow, and Harry saw something upon the skin there, something like a vivid red tattoo - a skull with a snake protruding from its mouth - the image that had appeared in the sky at the Quidditch World Cup: the Dark Mark. Voldemort examined it carefully, ignoring the uncontrollable weeping.

"It is back," he said softly, "they will all have noticed it... and now, we shall see... now we shall know..."

He pressed his long white forefinger to the brand on Wormtail's arm. The scar on Harry's forehead seared with a sharp pain again, and Wormtail let out a fresh howl; Voldemort removed his fingers from Wormtail's mark, and Harry saw that it had turned jet black. A look of cruel satisfaction on his face, Voldemort straightened up, threw back his head, and stared around at the dark graveyard. "How many will be brave enough to return when they feel it?" he whispered, his gleaming red eyes fixed upon the stars. "And how many will be foolish enough to stay away?"

He began to pace up and down before Harry and Wormtail, eyes sweeping the graveyard all the while. After a minute or so, he looked down at Harry again, a cruel smile twisting his snakelike face. "You stand, Harry Potter, upon the remains of my late father," he hissed softly. "A Muggle and a fool... very like your dear mother. However, they both had their uses, did they not? Your mother died to defend you as a child... and I killed my father, and see how useful he has proved himself, in death..."

Voldemort laughed again. Up and down, he paced, looking all around him as he walked, and the snake continued to circle in the grass. "You see that house upon the hillside, Potter? My father lived there. My mother, a witch who lived here in this village, fell in love with him. However, he abandoned her when she told him what she was... He didn't like magic, my father..."

"He left her and returned to his Muggle parents before I was even born Potter, and she died giving birth to me, leaving me to be raised in a Muggle orphanage... but I vowed to find him... I revenged myself upon him, that fool who gave me his name... Tom Riddle..." Still he paced, his red eyes darting from grave to grave. "Listen to me, reliving family history..." he said quietly, "why, I am growing quite sentimental... But look, Harry! My true family returns..."

The air was suddenly full of the swishing of cloaks. Between graves, behind the yew tree, in every shadowy space, wizards were Apparating. All of them were hooded and masked. One by one, they moved forward... slowly, cautiously, as though they could hardly believe their eyes. Voldemort stood in silence, waiting for them. Then one of the Death Eaters fell to his knees, crawled toward Voldemort and kissed the hem of his black robes. "Master... Master" he murmured.

The Death Eaters behind him did the same; each of them approaching Voldemort on their knees and kissing his robes, before backing away and standing up, forming a silent circle, which enclosed Tom Riddle Senior's grave, Harry, Voldemort, and the sobbing and twitching heap that was Wormtail. Yet they left gaps in the circle, as though waiting for more people. Voldemort, however, did not seem to expect more. He looked around at the hooded faces, and though there was no wind, rustling seemed to run around the circle.

"Welcome, Death Eaters," said Voldemort quietly. "Thirteen years... thirteen years since last we met. Yet you answer my call as though it were yesterday, we remain, still united under the Dark Mark! Or..." He put back his terrible face and sniffed, his slit-like nostrils widening. "I smell guilt," he said. "There is a stench of guilt upon the air." A second shiver ran around the circle, as though each member of it longed, but did not dare to step back from him. "I see you all, whole and healthy, with your powers intact - such prompt

appearances! And I ask myself... why did this band of wizards never come to the aid of their master, to whom they swore eternal loyalty?"

No one spoke. No one moved except Wormtail, who was upon the ground, still sobbing over his bleeding arm. "And I answer myself," whispered Voldemort, "they must have believed me broken, they thought I was gone. They slipped back among my enemies, and they pleaded innocence, and ignorance, and bewitchment... Then I ask myself, but how could they have believed I would not rise again? They, who knew the steps I took, long ago, to guard myself against mortal death? They, who had seen proofs of the immensity of my power in the times when I was mightier than any wizard living?"

"And I answer myself, perhaps they believed a still greater power could exist, one that could vanquish even Lord Voldemort... perhaps they now pay allegiance to another... perhaps that champion of commoners, of Mudbloods and Muggles, Albus Dumbledore?" At the mention of Dumbledore's name, the members of the circle stirred, and some muttered and shook their heads. Voldemort ignored them. "It is a disappointment to me... I confess myself disappointed..."

"I want thirteen years of service and begging before I forgive you! Any of you! Wormtail here has paid some of his debt already, have you not, Wormtail?" He looked down at Wormtail, who continued to sob. "You returned to me, not out of loyalty, but out of fear of your old friends. You deserve this pain, Wormtail. You know that, don't you? Yet you helped return me to my body," said Voldemort coolly, watching Wormtail sob on the ground. "Worthless and traitorous as you are, you helped me... and Lord Voldemort rewards those who are in his service and loyal". Voldemort raised his wand again and whirled it through the air. A streak of what looked like molten silver hung shining in the wand's wake. Momentarily shapeless, it writhed and then formed itself into a gleaming replica of a human hand, bright as moonlight, which soared downward and fixed itself upon Wormtail's bleeding wrist.

Wormtail's sobbing stopped abruptly. His breathing harsh and ragged, he raised his head and stared in disbelief at the silver hand, now attached seamlessly to his arm, as though he were wearing a dazzling glove. He flexed the shining fingers, then, trembling, picked up a small twig on the ground and crushed it into powder. "My Lord," he whispered. "Master... it is beautiful... thank you... thank you..."

He scrambled forward on his knees and kissed the hem of Voldemort's robes.

"May your loyalty never waver again, Wormtail," said Voldemort.

"No, my Lord... never, my Lord..." Wormtail stood up and took his place in the circle, staring at his powerful new hand, his face still shining with tears. Voldemort now approached the man on Wormtail's right. "Lucius, my slippery friend," he whispered, halting before him. "I am told that you have not renounced the old ways, though to the world you present a respectable face. You are still ready to take the lead in a spot of Muggle-torture, I believe. Yet you never tried to find me, Lucius... Your exploits at the Quidditch World Cup were fun, I daresay... but might not your energies have been better directed toward finding and aiding your master?"

Voldemort made his way round the circle of masked, hooded and cloaked death eaters. Some he ignored, others he addressed, but they were a little too far from Harry to hear much of what was said. Though dizzy from the pain, he struggled through it, determined to hear as much as possible. Bound by his side, Hermione was terrified but stayed quiet, only capable of watching in fear.

The Death Eaters stirred, and Harry saw their eyes dart sideways at one another through their masks. Voldemort stood before Harry, but continued talking as if he had all the time in the world, "...faithful servant, and it was through his efforts that our young friend arrived here tonight..." said Voldemort, a grin curling his lipless mouth as the eyes of the circle flashed in Harry's direction. "Harry Potter has kindly joined us for my rebirthing party. One might go so far as to call him my guest of honor."

There was a silence. Then the Death Eater to the right of Wormtail stepped forward, and Lucius Malfoy's voice spoke from under the mask. "Master, we crave to know... we beg you to tell us... how you have achieved this... this miracle... how you managed to return to us..."

"Ah, what a story it is, Lucius," said Voldemort. "And it begins - and ends - with my young friend here." He walked lazily over to stand next to Harry, so that the eyes of the whole circle were upon the two of them. The snake continued to circle. "You know, of course, that they have called this boy my downfall?" Voldemort said softly, his

red eyes upon Harry, whose scar began to burn so fiercely that he almost screamed in agony. "You all know that on the night I lost my powers and my body, I tried to kill him. His mother died in the attempt to save him – and unwittingly provided him with a protection I admit I had not foreseen... I could not touch the boy."

Voldemort raised one of his long white fingers and put it very close to Harry's cheek.

"His mother left upon him the traces other sacrifice... This is old magic, I should have remembered it, and I was foolish to overlook it... but no matter. I can touch him now."

Harry felt the cold tip of the long white finger touch him, and thought his head would burst with the pain. Voldemort laughed softly in his ear, then took the finger away and continued addressing the Death Eaters, filling them in on ten years as "less than the meanest ghost, less than spirit," and then their first face to face encounter: The Philosophers Stone, and then of Wormtail's escape the previous year and his accidental encounter with Bertha Jorkins.

"Now see the way that fate favors Lord Voldemort. This might have been the end of Wormtail, and of my last hope for regeneration. However, Wormtail - displaying a presence of mind I would never have expected from him - convinced Bertha Jorkins to accompany him on a nighttime stroll. He overpowered her... he brought her to me. And Bertha Jorkins, who might have ruined all, proved instead to be a gift beyond my wildest dreams... for - with a little persuasion - she became a veritable mine of information."

"She told me that the Triwizard Tournament would be played at Hogwarts this year. She told me that she knew of a faithful Death Eater who would be only too willing to help me, if I could only contact him. She told me many things... but the means I used to break the Memory Charm upon her were powerful, and when I had extracted all useful information from her, her mind and body were damaged beyond repair. She had now served her purpose. I could not possess her. I disposed of her."

Voldemort smiled his terrible smile, his red eyes blank and pitiless. "Wormtail's body, of course, was ill adapted for possession, as all assumed him dead, and would attract far too much attention if noticed. However, he was the able-bodied servant I needed, and,

poor wizard though he is, Wormtail was able to follow the instructions I gave him, which would return me to a rudimentary, weak body of my own, a body I would be able to inhabit while awaiting the essential ingredients for true rebirth... a spell or two of my own invention... a little help from my dear Nagini," Voldemort's red eyes fell upon the continually circling snake, "a potion concocted from unicorn blood, and the snake venom Nagini provided... I was soon returned to an almost human form, and strong enough to travel."

"It was an old piece of Dark Magic, the potion that revived me tonight - I would need three powerful ingredients. Well, one of them was already at hand, was it not, Wormtail? Flesh given by a servant. My father's bone, naturally, meant that we would have to come here, where he was buried. However, the blood of a foe... Wormtail would have had me use any wizard, would you not, Wormtail? Any wizard who had hated me... as so many still do. However, I knew the one I must use, if I was to rise again, more powerful than I had been when I had fallen. I wanted Harry Potters' blood. I wanted the blood of the one who had stripped me of power thirteen years ago... for the lingering protection his mother once gave him would then reside in my veins too...

"But how to get at Harry Potter? By using Bertha Jorkins's information. Use my one faithful Death Eater, stationed at Hogwarts, to ensure that the boy's name was entered into the Goblet of Fire. Things did not go according to plan, especially when Harry made his own plans and allied with the Goblins and befriended the other Champions in the bargain! However, my servant succeeded nonetheless, delivering, Harry Potter to me. And here he is... the boy you all believed had been my downfall..." Voldemort moved slowly forward and turned to face Harry. He raised his wand. "Crucio!"

It was pain beyond anything Harry had ever experienced; his very bones were on fire; his head was surely splitting along his scar; his eyes were rolling madly in his head... Then it was gone. He was hanging limply in the ropes binding him to the headstone of Voldemort's father, looking up into those bright red eyes through a kind of mist. The night was ringing with the sound of the Death Eaters' laughter.

"You see, I think, how foolish it was to suppose that this boy could ever have been stronger than me," said Voldemort. "But I want there to be no mistake in anybody's mind. Harry Potter escaped me by a lucky chance. I am now going to prove my power by killing him, here and now, in front of you all, when there is no Dumbledore to help him, and no mother to die for him. I will give him his chance. He will fight, and you will be left in no doubt which of us is the stronger. Just a little longer, Nagini," he whispered, and the snake glided away through the grass to where the Death Eaters stood watching.

Voldemort turned to Harry, "Yes. I will give him his chance, a fair fight, a duel to the death with Lord Voldemort, where he will do the utmost to not only survive, but to kill!" The smile, if that was what it was, more closely resembled the rictus of a man in agony. His wand rose, and the greatest threat to the wizarding world let the spell build, gradually. "I want Harry Potter to feel rage, to feel anger, and to hate. I want him to hear the flow of adrenalin through his veins, to feel pounding beat of his own heart as he fights for the kill." The spell flew from the wand, almost lazily.

It struck its target and her screams rendered the cool night air, "You can make it stop Harry," mocked Voldemort, "You can ask, beg and plead. And when you've suffered enough," he shrugged and his smile had not shifted, "or when she's suffered enough and begs me, I will release her from her pain."

However, she resisted, and resisted for as long as she could. It was not long before she was screaming. Wordless sound of agony. Harry would beg and plead, screaming over her screams and in between them. He himself screamed as Voldemort plied him with the same curse for a few moments, "The night is young, little Harry," said Voldemort conversationally, "And there are more ways to inflict pain than the Cruciatus Curse." Moonlight filtered through the clouds in to the graveyard, "Petrificus Totalus!"

True, there are more ways to inflict pain than just the Cruciatus Curse. That particular curse had earned its place as an unforgivable for its ability to be maintained indefinitely and to cause insanity. Other curses could inflict pain and agony to rival the Cruciatus, but were alone not enough to turn a mind to mush. But Voldemort's Legillimency could. And it was quick to make oh-so-interesting a discovery, one that he gleefully shared with Harry, "She's bound by a number of spells Harry." The Dark Lord smiled, "A combination of

little things: A Befuddlement hex, a Compulsion Charm, oh my," whispered Voldemort, "The lingering effects of a long term Imperious..." somebody has been having you on Harry. Shall I lift the memory charm?"

For a long moment, Harry simply stared at Voldemort. He had something would go wrong with the ritual, but an insane Voldemort was not the way he had hoped the ritual would go wrong. Hermione screamed a long note of agony that rocked Harry to the core of his soul, and then she went limp in her bindings, "Dumbledore... Dumbledore... hospital wing...before first task..." whispered Voldemort, it was as if he was cooing with pleasure.

"See Harry?" chuckled Voldemort, "Every your vaunted headmaster and servant of the light is no better than me... but perhaps I could go so far as to say that I AM better than him. Although I have tried to kill you, and I did kill your parents, I have been shall we say straight forward in my motivation, without manipulating friends and family. Can you say the same for your precious headmaster?"

Hermione looked at Harry and her eyes said it all. That everything Voldemort said was true.

After that, it continued. There was no telling how long it lasted, but when it finally came. Harry loathed admitting it, a part of him was grateful for it, "Time to say good bye, Harry," drawled Voldemort lifting the full body bind. He had seen it often enough in his Dementor fueled nightmares of the previous year of his parents and that sickly, diseased green glow. "Mione," he whispered, her cheeks were marred with tears, and blood. Blood dripped from her mouth when she first bitten her lip against the agony, and then bitten her tongue in the throes of the Cruciatus curse. There was no real fear left in her. There seemed to be no real sign of life in her weak, almost limp body, still tied to the headstone next to his. She was barely able to meet his eyes, but then, Voldemort had taken her ability to see, "Mione..."

"Hermione!" he whispered, desperately, pleading, she finally raised her head in his direction. No help had come. In all probability, no one knew where to look, or even where to start looking. Her hands, trembled, her wrists and ankles bled where they had chafed against the ropes until her blood had dyed the ropes. Through it all, she had

screamed until her voice broke but never once had she asked Voldemort for anything. Not pity. Not Mercy. Not even the right to die.

Harry knew when she mouthed the words, the three words that in all their time together, Harry had never once said. It was almost as if Voldemort was waiting for her to say it and to cut Harry off before he could reply, "Avada Kedavra." Not a shout or a scream but a malfoy-esque drawl. Tied to the headstone, Harry could do nothing but watch. The killing curse landed lightly upon her chest. It rippled outwards, slowly like the waves of the ocean striking shore at low tide. The green glow spreading out until outlined fully. There was no scream, no cry of pain. Just a simple exhale of her last, pain filled breath.

Someone slashed the bloody ropes that bound her. To Harry, she fell in slow motion. Every second taking minutes, every detail of her face, her disheveled hair, the blood specks. The way her robes fluttered in the still night air, the way the grass seemed to crumple and crackle beneath her weight. "I love you," he whispered. The words seemed so pointless. Empty and meaningless.

"We will give him a minute to mourn," instructed Voldemort as the Death Eaters erupted in laughter. A wave of his wand and Harry fell to the ground. He half crawled, half scrabbled over to her, and cradled her in his arms, fresh tears falling from his eyes, in to her hair like rough uncut diamonds. Hermione Jane Granger was dead. He held her and cried, behind closed eyes he saw everything that their relation had been, and felt his heart break, at what would have, should have, and could have been. He tightened his hold, even though she would never hold him back. The memories flooded through his mind, and all he saw were the highlights of his relationship, less than one school year together, but he had known happiness, and known love, like nothing he'd ever had before. Now he had nothing left.

"Now, Wormtail, give him back his wand."

Chapter 19

Duel

His wand landed next to him, but he did not notice. He did not care. He did the only thing that somehow made any kind of sense: He just held her d. He thought he had experienced pain, agony the likes of which people write about and fail to describe. There were and are no words to describe what the death of Hermione Jane Granger did to Harry James Potter.

He collected his wand and for a split second, Harry considered running for it, but as he stood on the overgrown grave of Voldemort Senior, the Death Eaters closed ranks and formed a tight circle around the duelists, "You have been taught how to duel Harry Potter?" said Voldemort softly, his red eyes glinting through the darkness.

At these words, Harry remembered, as though from a former life, the dueling club at Hogwarts he had attended briefly two years ago... All he had learned there was the Disarming Spell, "Expelliarmus"... Though better trained, he knew what this was: A duel to the death, the unforgivable curses and even if he did somehow beat Voldemort, there were another thirty plus death eaters who would kill him.

"We bow to each other Harry," said Voldemort, bending a little, but keeping his snakelike face upturned to Harry. "Come, the niceties must be observed... Dumbledore would like you to show manners... Bow to death, Harry..."

The Death Eaters were laughing again. Voldemorts lipless mouth was smiling. Harry did not bow. "I said, bow," Voldemort said, raising his wand - and Harry felt his spine curve as though a huge, invisible hand were bending him ruthlessly forward, and the Death Eaters laughed harder than ever.

"Very good," said Voldemort softly, and as he raised his wand, the pressure bearing down upon Harry lifted too. "And now you face me, like a man... straight-backed and proud, the way your father died...And now, we duel." Voldemort raised his wand, and before Harry could do anything to defend himself, before he could even move, the Cruciatus hit him again. The pain was so intense, so all consuming, that he no longer knew where he was... White-hot

knives were piercing every inch of his skin, his head was surely going to burst with pain, he was screaming more loudly than he had ever screamed in his life.

It stopped. Harry rolled over and scrambled to his feet; he was shaking as uncontrollably as Wormtail had done when his hand had been cut off; he staggered sideways into the wall of watching Death Eaters, and they pushed him away, back toward Voldemort.

"A little break," said Voldemort, the slit-like nostrils dilating with excitement, "a little pause... That hurt, didn't it Harry? You don't want me to do that again, do you?"

Harry didn't answer. He was going to die like Cedric, those pitiless red eyes were telling him so... he was going to die, and there was nothing he could do about it... but he wasn't going to play along. He wasn't going to obey Voldemort... he wasn't going to beg... "I asked you whether you want me to do that again," said Voldemort softly. "Answer me! Imperio"

And Harry felt the sensation that his mind had been wiped of all thought... Ah, it was bliss, not to think, it was as though he were floating, dreaming... just answer no... say no... just answer no... I will not, said a stronger voice, in the back of his head, I won't answer... Just answer no... I won't do it, I won't say it... Just answer no... "I WON'T!"

"You won't?" said Voldemort quietly, and the Death Eaters were not laughing now. "You won't say no? Harry, obedience is a virtue I need to teach you before you die... Perhaps another little dose of pain?"

Voldemort raised his wand, but this time Harry was ready; with the reflexes born of his Quidditch training, he flung himself sideways onto the ground; he rolled behind the marble headstone of Voldemort's father, and he heard it crack as the curse missed him.

"We are not playing hide-and-seek, Harry," said Voldemort's soft, cold voice, drawing nearer, as the Death Eaters laughed. "You cannot hide from me. Does this mean you are tired of our duel? Does this mean that you would prefer me to finish it now, Harry? Come out, Harry...come out and play...it will be quick... it might even be painless... I would not know... I have never died..."

Harry crouched behind the headstone and knew the end had come. There was no hope... no help. He heard Voldemort draw nearer still, he knew one thing only, and it was beyond fear or reason: He was not going to die crouching here like a child; he was not going to die kneeling at Voldemort's feet... he was going to die upright like his father, and he was going to die fighting.

Before Voldemort could stick his snakelike face around the headstone, Harry stood up... he gripped his wand tightly and threw himself around the headstone, facing Voldemort, "Confringo! Bombarda! Reducto Pluribus!" The torrent of spells leapt from Harry's wand. Voldemort reacted by almost lazily casting a shield that deflected or absorbed the attacks. Voldemort stopped laughing as he skidded across the grass on a patch of ice, coming directly towards Harry. Unable to arrest his forward momentum, the "greatest wizard of all time" stared in surprise as Harry's fist rocketed in to his snake like nose. Then Harry did it a second time for good measure.

The Death Eaters stopped laughing, stunned at Potter's sheer audacity as Voldemort's shield flickered. A spell blew the two combatants apart, and Harry slammed back first in to the grave of Tom Riddle Senior. He slid along it, forced to halt as he slammed in to tortured remains of his girlfriend. It was in that moment, that dark moment when Harry understood something, Griphook had tried to teach him and he had failed to properly master. Rage. Anger. Hatred. All cloud judgment but channeling that rage in combat was what made the weakest of Goblins a formidable enemy to a qualified, battle experienced Auror of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

Harry roared a wordless sound. He had tapped in to something primal. There were no friends here. There were no allies here. There was no one, nothing but the foot soldiers of the enemy. Nothing but the less-than-human-thing that lead the Death Eaters. There was nothing to hold him back, to act as a block or restraint. It surged through him, and he unleashed it, without a care.

"Accio Wand!" he roared, and Hermione's wand leapt in to his free left hand, an emerald flame seemed to eke from his eyes, "Inritus Umbra!" he swept his Holly wand from left to right, the nothingness of shadow erased anything material it came in contact with including

several hapless Death Eaters as the rest scattered for cover. "Exuro is pessum!" The torrent of flame that leapt from the vinewood in his left hand had a more common name: Fyndfire. He adjusted the aim of his second wand, "Iuguolo Meus Inimicus!" The flame roared across the grass towards the Dark Lord of the Death Eaters.

Voldemort stood, shocked. To conjure a single bolt of the Void Shadow was a feat in itself, but to conjure and control it like scythe then to summon Fyndfire was astounding.

Before either spell would reach him, he would kill the child! "Avada Kedevra!" he screamed. Harry felt more than heard the casting of the killing curse and directed the Fyndfire, living flame in to the path of the curse. The flames vanished as they curse dissipated the membrane of living energy that gave it form. Holding his wands side by side, he cast. "Perspicuus Lancea!"

"Avada Kedevra!" Voldemort snarled. The jet of green light met its silver counterpart in midair and suddenly Harry's wand was vibrating as though an electric charge were surging through it. His hand seized up around it; he could not have released it if he had wanted to - and a narrow beam of deep gold light connected the two wands, and their owners. Harry followed the beam with his astonished gaze, saw that Voldemort's long white fingers too were gripping a wand that was shaking and vibrating.

And then - nothing could have prepared Harry for this - he felt his feet lift from the ground. He and Voldemort were both being raised into the air, their wands still connected by that thread of shimmering golden light. They glided away from the tombstone of Voldemort's father and then came to rest on a patch of ground that was clear and free of graves... The Death Eaters were shouting; they were asking Voldemort for instructions; they were closing in, reforming the circle, the snake, Nagini, slithering at their heels.

The golden thread connecting Harry and Voldemort splintered; though the wands remained connected, a thousand more beams arced high over Harry and Voldemort, crisscrossing all around them, until they were enclosed in a golden, dome-shaped web, a cage of light, beyond which the Death Eaters circled like jackals, their cries strangely muffled now...

"Do nothing!" Voldemort shrieked to the Death Eaters, and Harry saw his red eyes wide with astonishment at what was happening, saw him fighting to break the thread of light still connecting his wand with Harry's; Harry held onto his wand more tightly, with both hands, and the golden thread remained unbroken. "Do nothing unless I command you!" Voldemort shouted to the Death Eaters.

And then an unearthly and beautiful sound filled the air... It was coming from every thread of the light-spun web vibrating around Harry and Voldemort. It was a sound Harry recognized it: Phoenix song. It was the sound of hope to Harry... the most beautiful and welcome thing he had ever heard in his life... He felt as though the song were inside him instead of just around him, and it was almost as though a friend were speaking in his ear...

Don't break the connection.

I know. Harry told the music, I know I mustn't... but no sooner had he thought it, than the thing became much harder to do. His wand began to vibrate more powerfully than ever... and now the beam between him and Voldemort changed too... it was as though large beads of light were sliding up and down the thread connecting the wands - Harry felt his wand give a shudder under his hand as the light beads began to slide slowly and steadily his way... The direction of the beams movement was now toward him, from Voldemort, and he felt his wands shudder angrily.

As the closest bead of light moved nearer to Harry's wand tip, the wood beneath his fingers grew so hot he feared it would burst into flame. The closer that bead moved, the harder Harry's wand vibrated; he was sure his wand would not survive contact with it; it felt as though it was about to shatter under his fingers –

He concentrated every last particle of his mind upon forcing the bead back toward Voldemort, his ears full of phoenix song, his eyes furious, fixed... and slowly, very slowly, the beads quivered to a halt, and then, just as slowly, they began to move the other way... and it was Voldemort's wand that was vibrating extra-hard now... Voldemort who looked astonished, and almost fearful...

One of the beads of light was quivering, inches from the tip of Voldemort's wand. Harry didn't understand why he was doing it, didn't know what it might achieve... but he now concentrated as he

had never done in his life on forcing that bead of light right back into Voldemort's wand... and slowly... very slowly... it moved along the golden thread... it trembled for a moment... and then it connected...

At once, Voldemort's wand began to emit echoing screams of pain... then - Voldemort's red eyes widened with shock - a dense, smoky hand flew out of the tip of it and vanished and then something much larger began to blossom from Voldemort's wand tip, a great, grayish something, that looked as though it were made of the solidest, densest smoke... It was a head... now a chest and arms... Hermione.

If ever Harry might have released his wand from shock, it would have been then, but instinct kept him clutching his wand tightly, so that the thread of golden light remained unbroken. This shade of her stood up, looked up and down the golden thread of light, and spoke to him, "Hold on," it whispered, "My love."

Its voice was distant and echoing. Harry looked at Voldemort... his wide red eyes were still shocked... he had no more expected this than Harry had... and, very dimly Harry heard the frightened yells of the Death Eaters, prowling around the edges of the golden dome...

Next was Cedric. He stood as had in life, back straight, head held high, with a small smile like he was on the inside of the biggest prank in the world, "That rat faced skint was using You-Know... Voldemort's wand," it shrugged, "You can win this Harry. They called us Champions. Champions of our schools," the shade smiled, and clapped Harry on the shoulder. Its touch felt... real, "They will call upon you. They will chant your name. They will call you Champion of the Light. Because it's true."

More screams of pain from the wand, and the dense shadow of a second head, quickly followed by arms and torso. An old man was now pushing himself out of the end of the wand just as Cedric had done, and surveyed the tableau before him and leaned on his walking stick, "He was a real wizard, then?" the old man said, his eyes on Voldemort. "Killed me that one did... You dare fight him! Man to Man! Old soldiers like me, never stood a chance! Who Dares, Wins! Remember that boy!"

His arms shook as he kept his wands level, but he held firm as he drew strength for the words of those around him. The connection

held firm as another form emerged, struck the ground and straightened up like the others. The shadow of Bertha Jorkins surveyed the battle before her with wide eyes. "Don't let go, now!" she cried, and her voice echoed like Cedrics as though from very far away. "He won't get you! Harry - don't let go!"

She and the other shadowy figures began to pace around the inner walls of the golden web, while the Death Eaters flitted around the outside of it... and Voldemort's dead victims whispered as they circled the duelers, whispered words of encouragement to Harry, and hissed words Harry couldn't hear to Voldemort. And now another head was emerging from the tip of Voldemort's wand... and Harry knew when he saw it who it would be... he knew, as though he had expected it from the moment when Cedric had appeared from the wand... knew, because the woman appearing was the one he'd thought of more than any other tonight.

"Your father's coming..." she said quietly. "He wants to see you... it will be all right... hold on..."

And he came... first his head, then body... a young man, the smoky, shadowy form of James Potter blossomed from the end of Voldemort's wand, fell to the ground, and straightened like his wife. He walked close to Harry, looking down at him, and she spoke in the same distant, echoing voice as the others, but quietly, so that Voldemort, his face now livid with fear as his victims prowled around him, could not hear. "When the connection is broken, we will linger for only moments... but we will give you time... you must get to the Portkey, it will return you to Hogwarts... do you understand, Harry?"

"Yes," Harry gasped, fighting now to keep a hold on his wand, which was slipping and sliding beneath his fingers.

His father and mother, specters and shadows of their former selves stood at his shoulders, their ghostly hands atop his own. Hermione wrapped her arms around him from behind, translucent, smoky but still she held him. It felt like she was there with her warm arms around him. An embrace he would remember forever, "I love you," she whispered, and whispered some more. What she whispered to him, what encouragement she gave him, in perhaps the darkest moment of his young life, none alive know.

"Harry," the ghost of Cedric said, "Take Hermione back... her parents will need," the spirit struggled to find the right words, "Closure." It could read the question in Harry's eyes, "I am a wizard. Take my wand. It will be enough."

"I will," said Harry, his face screwed up with the effort of holding the wand.

"Do it now," whispered his father's voice, "be ready to run... do it now..."

"NOW!" Harry yelled. He didn't think he could have held on for another moment anyway - he pulled his wand upward with an almighty wrench, there was the sound of splintering wood and the golden thread broke; the cage of light vanished, the phoenix song died - but the shadowy figures of Voldemort's victims did not disappear. They were closing in upon Voldemort, shielding Harry from his gaze.

Harry ran as he had never run in his life, knocking two stunned Death Eaters aside as he passed; he zigzagged behind headstones, feeling their curses following him, hearing them hit the headstones. He was dodging curses and graves, pelting toward Hermione, no longer aware of the pain in his body, his whole being concentrated on what he had to do.

"Stun him!" he heard Voldemort scream. Hermione's wand unleashed a barrage of curses as he summoned Cedric's wand to him. From a muffled yell, he thought he had stopped at least one of them, but there was no time to stop and look. He leapt, and caught Cedric's wand. He heard more spell blasts behind him; more jets of light flew over his head as he fell, stretching out his hand to grab Hermione's lifeless arm. Now he just needed -

The spell lanced across his field of vision, missing him by scant inches. It was a bluish yellow color, he noticed before it struck his wand with pinpoint precision. His wand did not snap, so much as explode. Holly shards, entwined with phoenix feather peppered the skin of his arm, chest, neck and face. The burning wood splintered seared flesh and he bit back a scream of pain.

"Stand aside! I will kill him! He is mine!" shrieked Voldemort. Harry's hand had closed on Hermione's wrist; one tombstone stood between

him and Voldemort, though he could carry her, it seemed impossible when she was dead weight. Voldemort's red eyes flamed in the darkness. Harry saw his mouth curl into a smile, saw him raise his wand.

"Accio!" Harry yelled, pointing Hermione's wand at the chunky medal. It flew into the air and soared toward him. Harry caught it, felt the pin stab in to the palm of his hand. Voldemort screamed in fury as he felt the jerk behind his navel that meant the Portkey had worked - it was speeding him away in a whirl of wind and color, Hermione along with him, Cedric's wand in hand... They were going back.

Chapter 20

Assassinations and Revelations

"Mordsmorde!" a voice screamed.

All hell broke loose as the sky overhead darkened. The clouds, twisted by magic formed the screaming skull with its black snake tongue. Voldemort's mark emblazoned across the skies. The medal pinned to Cedric's chest glowed a deep purple for an instant and the three were pulled from Hogwarts.

Pandemonium ensued.

"Avada Kedevra!" screamed Igor Karkaroff. The spell lanced from his wand, and streaked towards its intended target.

"Avada Kedevra!" roared Alastor Moody. His own spell split seconds behind Karkaroff's.

Both spells streaked towards their target: Albus Dumbledore.

Not for nothing however, was the one hundred and fifty something year old considered one of the greatest wizards of the age. The killing curse cannot be countered or blocked with a shield or another form of magic, it is possible to block it with an object. The judges table splintered in half and the headmaster banished the halves in opposite directions, intercepting both spells.

War axe in hand, Griphook leapt at Karkaroff, and very nearly decapitated the Durmstrang headmaster. The blundgeoning hex slammed Griphook backwards, but the Goblin dug in his heels and stayed vertical, grunting in pain as several of his ribs cracked, despite his armor. "Goblin filth!" snarled Karkaraoff.

The Honor Guard, paralyzed in the first moments of the unfolding tableau reacted with blasting hexes, cutting charms, and stunners that swept Igor off his feet, tumbled him head over heels before he crashed to the ground with multiple broken bones and all manner of internal injury. Griphook saluted with his axe and ducked as a killing curse swept over his head.

Dumbledore turned his wrath upon the Auror turned traitor, who proved to be surprisingly nimble, even if he was missing one real leg. The headmaster conjured a whip of fire and sought to snare his opponent. The whip cracked through the air as the traitor ducked low and fired a curse that screamed as it hurtled its way across the grass. The headmaster showed none of his age, nimbly sidestepping, "You, are not Alastor Moody - even though he studied the Dark Arts extensively, he would never fall to actually using them!"

Dumbledore only received a growl in reply in as the shards of the judges table were banished at him. The headmaster swatted the shards aside, and suddenly, seemed to lose interest in the duel, soft lobbing a string of minor jinxes and hexes. Moody laughed, the same dark gravelly laugh he'd always had, "Is this the best you can do Dumbledore?" the traitor projected a simple shield, "The greatest wizard of the age weakened so soon?"

Dumbledore stayed silent at the taunt, "Accio!" The imposter toppled as if he had been pole-axed by the killing curse, wand flying from his hand as he landed ass first. Scrambling backwards, minus his wooden leg, the imposter made a desperate lunge for his wand, lying a few feet away on the grass. "Pertrificus Totalus! Stupefy! Incarcerous!"

Both incapacitated attackers were chained and locked in a windowless unused room on the fifth floor of the astronomy tower. Two professors and Hagrid stood guard.

There was no way to know where two of the four champions and Hermione Granger were. There was nothing to do, but wait. By any mortal means of reckoning, it was only three hours later that the wards flickered. Albus Dumbledore, hurried in to the grounds, only to find Potter's retinue had never even left the site of the award ceremony.

There was a brief, sudden pulse of light. Nine wands and twelve bladed weapons rose in caution. Moments later, they were lowered as Griphook hurried towards the Gringotts Champions sprawled on his face across the grass.

For the second time Harry felt himself slam flat into the ground; his face pressed into grass; the smell of it filled his nostrils. He had

closed his eyes while the portkey transported him, and he kept them closed now. He did not move. All the breath seemed to have been knocked out of him; his head was swimming so badly he felt as though the ground beneath him was swaying like the deck of a ship. To hold himself steady, he tightened his hold on the two things he was still clutching: the smooth, cold medal even if it did drive the pin deeper in to his palm... and Hermione's body. He debated whether or not to stand and face what was coming or to just let himself go in to the darkness that danced and teased him with its numbing blackness. Shock and exhaustion kept him on the ground, breathing in the smell of the grass. Could he just stay here, where it was wonderfully quiet and peaceful?

Then a pair of hands seized him and turned him over, "Ursh-Khai?" the voice was gentle, like that of a concerned parent. "Harry?" he opened his eyes and saw the starry sky overhead, Griphook crouched over him. There was a wave of dark shadows, and then the sharp voice ordering them to maintain a defensive perimeter. Harry felt the ground beneath his head reverberating with their footsteps. He had come back to the edge of the maze. He could see the stands rising above him, the shapes of people moving in them, the stars above. Harry let go of the medal, but he tightened his hold on Hermione even more. He raised his free hand and seized Griphook's wrist, the goblin's face swimming in and out of focus the entire time, "He's back." Harry whispered. "He's back. Voldemort."

"What's going on? What's happened?" The face of Headmaster Albus Dumbledore appeared upside down over Harry, pale and worried, "Hermione..." he whispered, shaking his head "She's..." the last word made Harry cringe, and a fresh tear trailed down his cheek. "Harry, let go of her," he heard Dumbledore say. Fingers tried to pry open his hand, but his grip tightened further and the boy-who-lived surged to his feet, eyes blazing in to Dumbledore's face from a distance of several inches.

"Do. Not. Touch. Me." He ground out, "Do not touch her!" he roared, rising with his wand outstretched. He drew several gasps at his appearance, but he barely noticed them. And no wonder: His wrists, ankles and the base of his neck were red, raw and bleeding. Scratches and bruises covered his chest and back. The dagger wound on his forearm bleed freely, blood drooling down his arm with a ghastly slowness. His right arm and side of his chest were covered in scabbed puncture wounds.

Dumbledore had not moved, "You cannot help her, Harry." He said quietly.

"You never helped her when she was alive," snapped Harry uncaring of the headmaster's feelings, "Griphook, please see to it, that her... remains..."

"It will be as you instruct," replied Griphook with a shallow bow, he barked a string of orders and the Axe Masters Honor Guard snapped to attention. Harry swayed and the Goblin grabbed his shoulder and steadied him, leaning in close, "She was a good friend," Griphook struggled to find the right words, "to me. I can only offer you my condolences, Harry." The goblin slipped a number of small vials in to his hand, "I know that it has been a... a terrible evening for you but Dumbledore has the two instigators in custody. Shall I have them remanded in to Goblin custody?"

Harry pulled the corks and downed them: Bruise reducer, headache remover, blood-replenishing potion, and a dose of pepper up potion. Though it helped make his body feel better, it also cleared his mind of most of the physical pain but the emotional pain, the anguish of loss ripped through his consciousness, again. Suddenly, the only thing that mattered was the truth. Cedric Diggory and Hermione Jane Granger would only be the first of many more, "No. Veritaserum. Let's get the truth."

"Harry," said Blake, "You need to rest first... you've been through hell..."

The teenager shook his head; "I won't be able to rest, not until, I know..." he turned to his gathered friends, "Thank you for what you've done. Get some sleep... one of us, will fill you in on the details tomorrow." They filed past, each of them passing to offer some token of comfort, a gesture of support: A handshake from Colin, a hug from Ginny, a squeeze of the shoulder from Neville. All seven teenagers did what they could, and moved on, "Blake, Griphook, Moony," he was beyond exhausted, but determined as he stalked towards the headmaster. There was ice in Harry's voice, "Where are they?"

"I'm sorry Harry, but you do not have the right to interrogate them," said the headmaster, "I have already contacted the Ministry. A team of Aurors and the Minister of Magic will be conducting the..."

Griphook cut him off, "An attack upon any champion is an attack against the school he represents, per the rules of the tournament." Griphook smiled nastily, "Veritaserum would be letting the pair of them off lightly. Goblins have far more, destructive methods of extracting information that we would be well within our rights to employ."

Dumbledore sighed, he had been afraid of this. The advisors that Harry had surrounded himself with were not only fonts of sage advice but were also potential threats that could lead Harry down some very dark paths. "Harry, can I speak to you for a moment in private?"

The grim smile should have been a warning as they ducked in to the deserted Champions tent, "Now Harry..."

The punches took the headmaster in the gut, doubling him over, "Confundus Charm!" snarled Harry, "Compulsion hex!" another blow took the headmaster square underneath the chin rocking his head back, almost standing him upright, "Befuddlement Charm!" and landed a telegraphed roundhouse punch that knocked the headmaster to his knees, "Obliviate!" Harry bent over and whispered in to his stunned headmaster's ear, "Imperious Curse," he hissed, "Voldemort, tortured my 'Mione, and found your handiwork. I was in a full body bind, and forced to watch as Voldemort ripped through your spellwork while my love," his voice shook with barely suppressed rage, "screamed in agony and then confirmed what you did in the Hospital Wing! Before the First Task!"

Harry allowed the headmaster to stand, "You and I will have a reckoning, and soon. Know this old man. You so much as look at me wrong and I will bury you!" Harry holstered his wand, turned his back on the headmaster and stalked out of the tent, "Griphook," said Harry, "Take custody of the prisoners. Veritaserum. Get the truth from them." Harry did not have to say anything more: An attack upon a Goblin Champion representing Gringotts is an attack against Gringotts and the Goblins.

The Goblin could only grin. It did not take long. In fact, Karkaroff confessed to his involvement. The verbal summary of the interrogation from Griphook was direct and to the point, "Igor Karkaroff, Death Eater, avoided imprisonment by cooperating with the Ministry during the first war. He had only one purpose: Assassinate Dumbledore. He knew nothing else of pertinence."

The tale of Alastor Moody however, read more like a movie script: Alastor Moody was actually a polyjuiced Barty Crouch Junior, convicted Death Eater who had allegedly died in Azkaban some thirteen years before. He explained everything, unable to do otherwise as the truth serum worked its magic. He explained his escape from Azkaban with his mother's help, the casting of the dark mark at the Quidditch World Cup, and then his "liberation" at the hands of Wormtail and how he had replaced the real Alastor Moody with Polyjuice Potion. The imprisoned Auror was rescued and recovering in the hospital wing.

It went on for several more pages, detailing how Barty Crouch Senior had been under the Imperius curse, escaped and attempted to warn Dumbledore. An insane smile lit the young man's features for a moment as he recounted killing his father and transfiguring him in to a bone now buried somewhere in the Forbidden Forest. "I offered to carry the Triwizard Cup in to the maze before dinner and when I collected it, I transformed the medal in to a portkey, activated by the spell to conjure the Dark Mark," the maniacal smile lit Barty's face once again, "The plan succeeded, and my master has been restored. He is returned to power and I will be honored by him beyond the dreams of wizards."

"Harry?" Blake said gently, "You have the truth, the ministry will have them, and Azkaban is where he's going... it's where these animals belong. You need to rest for a while."

Harry nodded. A kind of numbness and a sense of complete unreality were upon him, but he did not care; he was even glad of it. He did not want to have to think about anything that had happened since he had first touched the Triwizard Cup. He did not want to have to examine the memories, fresh and sharp as photographs, which kept flashing across his mind. The word "mordsmorde," Hermione tortured and dead, Wormtail, slumped on the ground, cradling his stump of an arm. Voldemort rising from the cauldron. Cedric... dead...Hermione... Cedric, giving advice from beyond the

grave.... Hermione...Cedric, "Griphook," Harry mumbled, "Where are Mr. and Mrs. Diggory?"

"They are with Professor Sprout," he answered, "She was Head of Cedric's house, and knew him best." Harry was only half listening. So tired every bone in his body was aching, he wanted nothing more than to sit here, undisturbed, for hours and hours, until he fell asleep and didn't have to think or feel anymore.

There was a flash of flame and Fawkes seemed to hover over the table at which the circle of friends sat. He landed on on Harry's shoulder, "Fawkes," said Harry quietly. He stroked the phoenix's beautiful scarlet-and gold plumage. Fawkes blinked peacefully up at him. There was something comforting about his warm weight. "What can you tell us after you arrived at your destination?" asked Griphook quietly.

"We can leave that till morning, can't we?" said Blake harshly. He had put a hand on Harry's shoulder. "Let him have a sleep. Let him rest." Harry felt a rush of gratitude

Griphook, disagreed, "Postponing the moment, will not make it easier... Numbing the pain for a short while will make it infinitely worse when you have to feel it." He grasped Harry's shoulder, sparing Blake an apologetic glance, "Courage and Honor," said Griphook, "Always before profit."

Harry had partially tuned them out, the persistent knocking sound, like somebody using a doorknocker. Then he realized where it was, and why only he could hear it, "My Lady?" he thought.

"Harry," she replied evenly, "I know that many have expressed their sorrow, and I would be remiss, if I did not offer mine as well." Fawkes let out one soft, quavering note. It shivered in the air, and Harry felt as though a drop of hot liquid had slipped down his throat into his stomach, warming him, and strengthening him. "If I may offer some advice on your current situation?"

Though he was cautious and paranoid, the Lady of the Castle was a myth that Hermione had traced back to the founding of the school. Who or more exactly, what she was another puzzle entirely. However, Hermione had confirmed - with Luna's help -was that the Lady emerged during times of great crisis for wizarding and muggle

kind. There were records of her assistance being leant to a number of wizards during Grindewald's reign of terror and even during the first wizarding war. "Albus Dumbledore has spent his life fighting for the Light, and in his old age, he has made mistakes. Some honest, others not so much, but for the moment you must trust him, with the truth of Voldemort's rebirth. He has been headmaster for so many years that he has educated and touched the lives of almost the entire wizarding community. He can rally the Light, to your cause..."

The irony of the situation was not lost on him. He had just punched out the very wizard he now needed. Harry sighed and gestured to the three adults he trusted, "I...only want to do this once: Get Dumbledore."

In the Headmaster's Office, his godfather stood on one side, Griphook was seated on the other as Harry took a deep breath and began to tell them, visions of all he had seen passing in front of his eyes. Blake watched the thousand yard stare of his godson with mounting concern. Dumbledore however raised his hand to forestall interruption. For Harry it was cathartic release, letting the poison of the evening flow from him, but it was costing him every ounce of will and determination to continue telling the tale, "He said my blood would make him stronger than if he'd used someone else's," Harry told Dumbledore. "He said the protection my - my mother left in me - he'd have it too. And he was right - he could touch me without hurting himself, he touched my face."

Harry went on; he explained how Voldemort had emerged from the cauldron, and told them all he could remember of Voldemort's speech to the Death Eaters. The worst part of it, he hesitated, he was not sure if he could or even wanted to share that. It was a raw wound, and he glossed over it, saying only that Hermione died at Voldemort's hand. He was surprised for a moment how easy it was to lie. When he reached the part where the golden beam of light had connected his and Voldemort's wands, he found his throat obstructed. He tried to keep talking, but the memories of what had come out of Voldemort's wand were flooding into his mind. He could see Hermione, then Cedric emerging, see the muggle, Bertha Jorkins... his father... his mother...

He was glad when Blake broke the silence. "The wands connected?" he said, looking from Harry to Dumbledore. "Why?"

Harry looked up at Dumbledore again, on whose face there was an arrested look. "Priori Incantatem," he muttered.

"The Reverse Spell effect?" said Blake sharply.

"Exactly," said Dumbledore. "Harry's wand and Voldemorts wand share cores. Each of them contains a feather from the tail of the same phoenix. This phoenix, in fact," he added, and he pointed at the scarlet-and-gold bird, perching peacefully on Harry's knee.

"My wand's feather came from Fawkes?" Harry said, quietly.

"Yes," said Dumbledore. "Mr. Ollivander wrote to tell me you had bought the second wand, the moment you left his shop four years ago."

"So what happens when a wand meets its brother?" asked the disguised Sirius Black.

"They will not work properly against each other," said Dumbledore. "If, however, the owners of the wands force the wands to do battle... a very rare effect will take place. One of the wands will force the other to regurgitate spells it has performed - in reverse. The most recent first... and then those which preceded it..." He looked interrogatively at Harry, and Harry nodded. "Which means," said Dumbledore slowly, his eyes upon Harry's face, "that some form of Hermione, and Cedric must have reappeared."

Harry nodded again.

"They came back to life?" said Moony sharply.

"No spell can reawaken the dead," said Dumbledore heavily. "All that would have happened is a kind of reverse echo. A shadow of them living... am I correct, Harry?"

"They spoke to me," Harry said. He was suddenly shaking again. "Th... the ghost Cedric, or whatever he was, spoke."

"An echo," said Dumbledore, "which retained Cedric's appearance and character. I am guessing other such forms appeared... less recent victims of Voldemort's wand..." The headmaster could only hope that this would be the beginnings of something: A way to repair

their relationship and get Harry back under control, where he belonged.

"An old man," Harry said, "Bertha Jorkins. And...Hermione," he whispered, a tear trailing down one cheek, "Cedric... And..."

"Your parents?" said Dumbledore quietly. Blake's grip on Harry's shoulder was now so tight it was painful. "The last murders the wand performed," said Dumbledore, nodding. "In reverse order. More would have appeared, of course, had you maintained the connection. Very well, Harry, these echoes, these shadows... what did they do?"

Harry described how the figures that had emerged from the wand had prowled the edges of the golden web, how Voldemort had seemed to fear them, how the shadow of Harry's mother had told him what to do, how Cedric's had made its final request for his wand and for Hermione's remains to be brought back.

"You have shown bravery beyond anything I could have expected of you tonight Harry. You have shown bravery equal to those who died fighting Voldemort at the height of his powers." Harry only glared at Dumbledore, and he realized quickly that the Harry who sat before him, was not the same teenager of this year. There was a vacant emptiness to the eyes, and a, hatred. An all-encompassing hatred, "You will come with me to the hospital wing," he said, as if he still all the power and authority he would ever need, "I do not want you returning to the dormitory tonight."

Griphook stood interceding before Harry could verbally tear the man's head off, "Headmaster, he will not be spending this night in the hospital wing. The residence is as secure as Gringotts, doubly so due to the protections extended by Hogwarts itself. It would be the most secure location within the castle." Griphook did not bother to add that the Axe Masters Honor Guard was now supported by elements of the Sword Wind Blades who had also cleared a path between the headmaster's office and Moaning Myrtle's bathroom.

"Griphook," Harry met his friend's gaze, "The... two men...the Goblins... Gringotts... you have done so much for me. Now I ask that you let the Ministry handle the trial and sentencing of the two men. Their testimony... will help the wizarding world accept what is coming." Griphook only nodded. He knew what was coming. They all did:

War.

Returned to his residence, he changed and collapsed in to his bed, and found that sleep would not come. He was lying, staring up at the ceiling. He glanced at the clock and realized he had been lying there for over an hour. He rose, and left, nodding to the Goblin stationed outside his door and in to Hermione's room. He collapsed on to the bed, and finally, let it all out, let it sink in, and let himself cry.

Hours later, just as the sun was rising, he was finally asleep.

The days following the tournament were surreal to Harry. The school year was ending and everything seemed to be going wrong. Minister Fudge had brought more than Aurors and Hit Wizards to collect the two wayward souls bound for Azkaban: He brought a Dementor for his "personal protection." It protected him well, administering its kiss to both Igor Karkaroff and Barty Crouch Junior. The interrogation reports were "beyond useless" as they had not been collected "following ministry approved guidelines." The screaming match between the Minister, Professor McGonagall and the Headmaster had reached near epic proportions and in itself would become a legend around Hogwarts:

"By all accounts, he is no loss!" Fudge had blustered, "It seems he has been responsible for several deaths'."

"But he cannot now give testimony, Cornelius," said Dumbledore. He was staring hard at Fudge, as though seeing him plainly for the first time. "He cannot give evidence about why he killed those people."

"Why he killed them? Well, that's no mystery, is it? He was a raving lunatic! From what Minerva and Severus have told me, he seems to have thought he was doing it all on You-Know-Who's instructions!"

"Lord Voldemort was giving him instructions, Cornelius," Dumbledore said. "Those peoples deaths were mere by-products of a plan to restore Voldemort to full strength again. The plan succeeded. Voldemort has been restored to his body."

Fudge looked as though someone had just swung a heavy weight into his face. Dazed and blinking, he stared back at Dumbledore as

if he couldn't quite believe what he had just heard. He began to sputter, still goggling at Dumbledore. You-Know-Who... returned? Preposterous. Come now, Dumbledore..."

Though the headmaster had tried, repeated and even offered common sense, practical suggestions and advice to the Minister about preparing for the war to come, the response had been blunt, "It seems to me that you are all determined to start a panic that will destabilize everything we have worked for these last thirteen years!" snarled Fudge.

"If your determination to shut your eyes will carry you as far as this, Cornelius," said Dumbledore, "we have reached a parting of the ways. You must act as you see fit. And I - I shall act as I see fit." Dumbledore's voice carried no hint of a threat; it sounded like a mere statement, but Fudge bristled as though Dumbledore were advancing upon him with a wand.

"Now, see here, Dumbledore," he said, waving a threatening finger. "I've given you free rein, always. I've had a lot of respect for you. I might not have agreed with some of your decisions, but I've kept quiet. There aren't many who'd have let you hire werewolves, or keep Hagrid, or decide what to teach your students without reference to the Ministry. But if you're going to work against me -"

"The only one against whom I intend to work," said Dumbledore, "is Lord Voldemort. If you are against him, then we remain, Cornelius, on the same side."

It seemed Fudge could think of no answer to this. He rocked backward and forward on his small feet for a moment and spun his bowler hat in his hands. Finally, he said, with a hint of a plea in his voice, "He can't be back, Dumbledore, he just can't be..."

The week did not improve from there, as he met first with the Cedric's parents. He told them little more than what they needed to know: He confirmed that their son won the Triwizard Tournament, that he had given his life to save another. "The wand chooses the wizard," said Harry, "and it served your son well. May it always stay with you, and bring you some comfort in the time ahead." He was machine like as he presented Cedric's wand in a dark blue velvet lined box, Mrs. Diggory was unable to hold back her tears as Cedric's father accepted the wand.

Hermione's parents were another story entirely. Where Cedric's parents had grown up, lived through and survived the first war with its attendant horror stories, the same could not be said his girlfriend's parents. From the get go it was clear that it was not going to go well: The first thing Derek Granger did was swing a roundhouse punch. Derek had telegraphed it, and Harry had seen it coming, but did nothing more than roll with the blow. He barely felt it, "Feel better Mr. Granger?" asked Harry, blood dribbling from his nose, "First one, was free. Next one," Harry drew his wand, "I'll make you pay for."

Derek Granger stood, clenching and unclenching his fists, clearly eager to take another swing at Harry. "Forgive him, Harry," said the woman accompanying him, obviously his wife and Hermione's mother. Her eyes were red from crying, hair disheveled, "It has been difficult..."

The silence was uncomfortable, for a long, long moment, until Harry waved his wand, stopping the flow of blood from his nose, and holstering the weapon and gestured slightly, "Please, sit down." Awkward does not begin to illustrate the situation. Though they had never met, Hermione's mother knew a great deal about Harry.

"My... our daughter, she hesitated, "was in love with you for a very long time," she reached in to her handbag, pulling out a stack of rolled up parchment, "She wrote a lot about you in her letters... and she did write to us at least twice a week." Mrs. Granger handed the letters to Harry who held the stack, uncertain what he was supposed to do with them, "I think you should have them..." her voice cracked, "Can you tell me, tell us, how, it happened?"

Though it got easier to tell, every time he told it, he had left out a part of it; he had always maintained the truth: Hermione was killed by Avada Kedavra, but he had never spoken of what had happened before that. Her parents, like Cedric's were suffering through perhaps the ultimate agony for any parent: Burying their child. Their only child. Better that they have a... pleasanter fiction.

"I should have just burned that letter!" growled Derek Granger, "Then none of this would have happened! She would never have met you! She would never have died at the hands of a madman!"

Harry could stand no more of Mr. Granger, "Mr. and Mrs. Granger, there are no words that I can say, that anyone can say to ease your pain, ease your loss. Your daughter was my closest friend, my girlfriend, and my first love." His voice broke, "I failed her." His eyes were dark circled and haunted, he had no more tears to shed, "I failed both of you when I didn't protect..." he shook his head, "I would give everything to trade places with your daughter, but I can't. Magic, for all its wonder and power, cannot cheat death." He drew his wand and began quickly copying the stack of letters, "The Goblins have instructions to move Hermione's coffin wherever you want it to go. They will handle all of the paperwork as well. Just tell them where and when."

Handing the originals back, he met Mrs. Granger's gaze, and found that she was confused by his actions, "The letters... are one of the few things that you have, to remind you of Hermione..." a single tear rolled down his cheek, "Your need is greater..." Harry fled.

Harry avoided the Great Hall. He ate late or early when he chose to dine there to avoid the students. His tutors still held lessons with him, but it was more for the benefit of the retinue though. Harry did not slack off - he pushed himself hard, throwing himself in to any task with an almost reckless abandon. It helped get his mind off the things that circled in his brain like sharks that had smelt blood in the water. The other two champions did not know what they could say or do. Fleur was having a hard time coping with the death of Cedric. Viktor... suffice to say that the Imperius Curse had left some psychological marks on the Bulgarian Seeker. The events of the third task had damaged their friendships, but not irreparably so. The three former champions, surrounded by their friends had spent too many long nights passing a vigil over an empty chair with bottles of butterbeer. When that proven to be insufficient, Viktor had produced firewhiskey. Nobody asked where he had gotten it- nobody cared.

He spent a fair amount of time with Hagrid too. The half giant said little to Harry who appreciated the silence. Only on the final day of the term did his friend finally ask the critical, all-important question: "You all right?" Harry gave his standard, generic semi positive response, "No, you're not," said Hagrid. "Course you're not. But you will be." Harry said nothing. "Knew he was going to come back," said Hagrid, and Harry looked up at him, shocked. "Known it for years, Harry. Knew he was out there, biding his time. It had to happen. Well, now it has, an' we'll just have to get on with it." Hagrid raised

his bushy eyebrows at the disbelieving expression on Harry's face, "No good sitting and worrying about it," he said. "War's coming. And we'll meet it when it does... Dumbledore told me what you did. Harry." Hagrid's chest swelled as he looked at Harry. "You did as much as your father would've done. I can't give you higher praise than that."

There was possible higher praise, if he had brought his love back. If she had lived instead of him, if he had died protecting her. There would have been higher praise for the boy who lived.

Now, he was just the boy who lost.

A/N:

I put this disclaimer up once and it applies to THIS ENTIRE WORK:

The characters, the universe and anything you can obviously recognize DO NOT belong to me and are the property of JK Rowling and whoever owns the copyrights.

There will be large chunks of canon material where I have made minor adjustments and changes to fit with my story as I am rewriting JKR's work to suit my taste, style and preferences. Therefore, that obviously belongs to her.

There is a prequel to this fic entitled "Years at War, Part 1: Triwizard Warfare." I would suggest reading that fic before reading this one so that you understand fully just what is going on.

This is written with realism. Blood, violence, sex, foul language all of it. If you want to read a kill-the-bad-guys-with-a-happy-grin-superhero-powers fanfic, do not read this. If you read the prequel, enjoyed it then I hope you will enjoy this as much, if not more.

I have ZERO TOLERANCE for flames of any kind. For the record, if you read, do not like and can explain/justify what and why you don't like something, that IS NOT a flame. If you flame, I WILL report you to the site admins.

For the Record: This is a work in progress. I may take it down, rewrite, change things. If you have a problem with that, please see the previous point about flames.

A point of interest was raised by a reviewer, xavierp: In the UK, they have terms, not semesters. Corrected accordingly.

Finally my heartfelt thanks and gratitude to Nachtrae for taking the time to read, edit and comment on this Chapter. She does amazing work and I'm lucky to have her as my beta.

Chapter 21

Si Vis Pacem Para Bellum

It was with a heavy heart that Harry packed his trunk up in the dormitory on the night before his return to Privet Drive. He was dreading the Leaving Feast, which was usually a cause for celebration with the announcement of the winner of the Inter-House Championship. He had avoided being in the Great Hall when it was full ever since he had left the hospital wing, preferring to eat when it was nearly empty to avoid the stares of his fellow students.

When he entered, with the other Champions and his retinue, they saw at once that the usual decorations were missing. Normally the colors of the house that won the Inter-House Championship would decorate the Leaving Feast. Tonight, there were black drapes along the walls, and even the four banners over the house tables seemed somehow, muted. Harry knew instantly that they were there as a mark of respect to Cedric and Hermione.

The real Mad-Eye Moody was at the staff table now, his wooden leg and his magical eye back in place. He was extremely twitchy, jumping every time someone spoke to him. Harry could not blame him; Moody's fear of attack was bound to have increased by his ten-month imprisonment in his own trunk.

Madame Maxime was still there. She was sitting next to Hagrid. They were talking quietly together. Further along the table, sitting next to Professor McGonagall, was Snape. His eyes lingered on Harry for a moment as Harry looked at him. His expression was difficult to read. He looked as sour and unpleasant as ever. Harry continued to watch him, long after Snape had looked away. Why... why... was Dumbledore so convinced that Snape was truly on their side? Snape had turned spy against Voldemort, "at great personal risk."

Professor Dumbledore, who stood up at the staff table, ended Harry's musings. The Great Hall, which in any case had been less noisy than it usually was at the Leaving Feast, became very quiet. "The end," said Dumbledore, looking around at them all, "of another year." He paused, and his eyes ran over the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tables, both easily the most subdued.

His eyes locked with Harry's for an instant and Harry met the look with a full on glare. The headmaster blinked and nodded every so slight towards Harry. Harry didn't even blink. "There is much that I would like to say to you all tonight," said Dumbledore, "but I must

first acknowledge the losses of two young people, both of whom should be sitting here, surrounded by friends," he gestured towards the two tables, "enjoying our feast with us. I would like you all, please, to stand, and raise your glasses, to Hermione Granger and Cedric Diggory."

They did, all of them: The benches scraped as everyone stood, raising their goblets high in to the air. Their voices rumbled out together like a thunderclap, echoing the names of each in turn. Harry's voice caught in his throat but he gutted through, noting distantly that Fleur had done the same over Cedric.

The headmaster's eulogy went unheard by Harry, who was staring down memory lane at something only he could see, "...deaths have affected you all, whether you knew them well or not. I think that you have the right, therefore, to know exactly how it came about." Harry raised his head and stared at Dumbledore, "Hermione Granger was murdered by Lord Voldemort," he paused for an instant and nodded, to them all, "Cedric Diggory was murdered by Lord Voldemort."

A panicked whisper swept the Great Hall. People were staring at Dumbledore in disbelief, in horror. He looked perfectly calm as he watched them mutter themselves into silence. "The Ministry of Magic," Dumbledore continued, "does not wish me to tell you this. It is possible that some of your parents will be horrified that I have done so - either because they will not believe that Lord Voldemort has returned, or because they think I should not tell you as you are too young to understand. It is my belief, however, that the truth is generally preferable to lies, and that any attempt to pretend that two of Hogwarts finest, of our finest died in an accident or some blunder of their own is an insult to them and their memory."

Stunned and frightened, every face in the Hall was turned toward Dumbledore now... or almost every face. Over at the Slytherin table Harry saw Draco Malfoy muttering something to Crabbe and Goyle. Harry felt a hot, sick swoop of anger in his stomach. He forced himself to look back at Dumbledore. "There is somebody else who must be mentioned in connection with their deaths," Dumbledore went on. "I am talking, of course, about Harry Potter."

A kind of ripple crossed the Great Hall as a few heads turned in Harry's direction before flicking back to face Dumbledore. "Harry Potter managed to escape Lord Voldemort," said Dumbledore. "He

risked his own life, returning with the wand of Cedric Diggory for his parents, and with the remains of Hermione Granger for her parents. He showed, in every respect, the sort of bravery, the courage that few wizards have ever shown in facing Lord Voldemort, and for this, I honor him."

Dumbledore turned gravely to Harry and raised his goblet once more. Nearly everyone in the Great Hall followed suit. They murmured his name, as they had murmured the others, and drank to him. This was too much. He needed to get out of the Great Hall. However, Luna took his hand on the left, while Ginny squeezed his shoulder gently on the right. They were not trying to keep him here he realized quickly, there was no strength in their grips, just an offer of quiet support.

Harry saw that Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, and many of the other Slytherins had remained defiantly in their seats, their goblets untouched. Dumbledore, who after all possessed no magical eye, did not see them. Harry made a silent note of the faces of those who had remained seated, and those that had toasted not only him, but Cedric and Hermione as well, from all four houses.

When everyone had once again resumed his or her seats, Dumbledore continued, "The Triwizard Tournament's aim was to further and promote magical understanding. In the light of what has happened - of Lord Voldemort's return - such ties are more important than ever before." Harry paused to consider the words of his headmaster, and wondered, whether this had been the point: To prepare the wizarding world for what was to come, and that everything were unintended side effects.

Dumbledore looked from Madame Maxime and Hagrid, to Fleur Delacour and her fellow Beauxbatons students, to Viktor Krum and the Durmstrangs at the Slytherin table. Krum, Harry saw, looked wary, almost frightened, as though he expected Dumbledore to say something harsh. "Every guest in this Hall," said Dumbledore, and his eyes lingered upon the Durmstrang students, "will be welcomed back here at any time, should they wish to come. I say to you all, once again - in the light of Lord Voldemort's return, we are only as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided. Lord Voldemort's gift for spreading discord and enmity is very great. We can fight it only by showing an equally strong bond of friendship and trust. We are all facing dark and difficult times."

"Remember Cedric. Remember Hermione. Remember, if the time should come when you have to make a choice between what is right and what is easy, remember what happened to a young man and a woman who were honorable, proud, loyal, kind, and brave. Remember them. Remember Hermione Granger. Remember Cedric Diggory."

Harry's trunk was packed; Hedwig sat upon his shoulder, preening herself. His friends circled around him, sending a clear message to all that disturbances would not be welcome - all of them had their wands in plain sight, sticking out of pockets or in visible wand holsters - as they waited for the carriages that would take them to Hogsmeade station. It was another beautiful summer's day. He supposed that Privet Drive would be hot and leafy; its flower beds a riot of color, when he arrived there that evening. The thought gave him no pleasure at all.

"Harry," he looked around. Fleur Delacour was hurrying up the stone steps into the castle. Across the grounds, Hagrid and Madame Maxine were wrestling two of the giant horses into their harness. The Beauxbatons carriage was about to take off, "We will see each other again, I hope." She bowed slightly, and Harry returned the shallow bow, Champion to Champion. He held out his hand and she tutted, "Such formality does not suit you," She pulled him in to a full hug and Harry was somewhere else for a moment. "I am hoping to get a job to improve my English," she said, her eyes wandering to his hair, yet again.

His friends had noticed and said nothing, because they did not know what they could say. Harry's hair was no longer the midnight black it used to be, there were shots of silver and grey and strangely enough, a long strip of brown hair twisted in to a braid that was long enough to tuck behind his right ear. He had changed his hair sometime after the tournament and before the leaving feast, but nobody was sure exactly when. Like the masses however, he was not sure when he had created that braid of hair.

"It's very good already," Harry said, "But I will always have time, if you need someone to practice with." She smiled and turned away, saying good-bye to the retinue, in particular the three Weasleys. He let himself just absorb her beauty for a few moments, tall, willowy, with a grace and poise that made it seem like she was gliding when

she walked. She laughed at something Fred said and her silvery blonde hair shimmered in to the morning sunlight. He could not help as his spirits lifted slightly, watching her hurry across the lawns to a waiting Madame Maxime.

"Wonder how the Durmstrang students are getting back," said Neville, "D' you reckon they can steer that ship without Karkaroff?"

"Karkaroff did not steer," said a gruff voice. "He stayed in his cabin and let us do the work." Krum had come to say good-bye, "Could I have a word?" he asked Harry. With a nod, Krum cast a quick silencing charm around them. Harry added a privacy charm and several others that he had learned, "Impressive."

Harry shrugged, "Wand's taking some getting used to, but I don't think it'll mind me too much." He had put on a neutral expression, and a few subtler charms hid the more obvious signs that he had not been sleeping well, "But wands only focus the magic... and with the tournament over, I'm back to being a regular teenager," he said with snort.

"I liked Diggory," said Krum abruptly to Harry. "He was always polite to me. Even though I was from Durmstrang..." Karkaroff being what he had been, nothing else need be said, "You are no regular teenager, Harry Potter. Hermione," he hesitated, knowing that his poor English could land him in several cauldrons of hot water, "She was a good friend... she loved you. Not "Boy who lived" or "Chosen one" or "Champion." She loved Harry Potter. She will always be with you in your heart, your soul. Treasure those memories, Harry. They will bring you strength, comfort, and..." Viktor hesitated for a moment, "She, will keep you honest, if you let her. I think that is what your headmaster fears the most."

The insightful comments made by the Bulgarian Seeker did not startle him in the slightest. Neville had made the same observation once before. Nevertheless, Harry nodded to show his understanding of what was said without it actually being said, "Have you got a new headmaster yet?" he asked, changing the subject.

Krum shrugged. He held out his hand as Fleur had done, to shake Harry's hand. Harry pulled the Quidditch star in to a hug. Victor froze up, tense and then relaxed and returned the hug, slapping Harry on the back as he did so, "Good bye my friend." said Viktor, "May our

paths cross in the future when all is at peace in our world." The Bulgarian strode back to his ship, where he would be the acting captain for his voyage home, "Remember this however," called Viktor, "Ci vis pacem, para bellum!"

"What's that mean?" shouted Harry after him.

"If you desire peace, prepare for war!"

Harry smiled at the Bulgarian's back as he heard the first of the carriages pull up behind him, "If you want peace, prepare for war" Shrinking his trunk with a wave of his wand, he pocketed it and began to walk. Hogsmeade station was not that far. Moreover, he felt like he could use the exercise.

The weather could not have been more different on the journey back to King's Cross than it had been on their way to Hogwarts the previous September. There was not a single cloud in the sky. Harry and his Retinue - or perhaps former retinue would be more appropriate now that the tournament was over - had taken over an entire compartment and with Harry's magic, enlarged it so that they could all fit comfortably. Hedwig was dozing with her arm under her wing; Crookshanks was a giant orange cushion on a spare seat. Conversation was quiet, and subdued and focused on what their next course of action would be. They somehow, felt liberated by Dumbledore's speech at the leaving feast.

The door of the compartment slid open.

"You seem to be missing someone, or two," said Draco Malfoy. Crabbe and Goyle were standing behind him. All three of them looked more pleased with themselves, more arrogant and more menacing, than Harry had ever seen them. "So," said Malfoy slowly, advancing slightly into the compartment and looking slowly around at them, a smirk quivering on his lips. Crabbe and Goyle leered. "Trying not to think about it, are we?" said Malfoy softly, looking around at them. "Trying to pretend it hasn't happened?"

"Get out," said Harry. He had not been this close to Malfoy since he had watched him muttering to Crabbe and Goyle during Dumbledores eulogy. He could feel a kind of ringing in his ears. He flexed his fingers and his knuckles cracked like a string of firecrackers.

"You've picked the losing side, Potter! I warned you! I told you - you ought to choose your company more carefully, remember? When we met on the train, first day at Hogwarts? I told you not to hang around with riffraff!" He jerked his head towards an empty seat and then grinned, "Oh... that's right, the Mudblood's already..."

A box of fireworks would have made less noise as no fewer than seven wands unleashed a blistering barrage of magic. Fifteen seconds and some twenty spell chained hexes later; Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle were all lying unconscious in the doorway.

"Interesting effect," said Fred, looking down at Crabbe. "Who used the Furnunculus Curse?"

"Me," said Harry.

"Odd," said George lightly. "I used Jelly-Legs. Looks as though those two shouldn't be mixed." He seems to have sprouted little tentacles all over his face, "Well, let's not leave them here, they don't add much to the decor."

Neville, Harry and George kicked, rolled, and pushed the unconscious Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle - each of whom looked distinctly the worse for the jumble of jinxes with which they had been hit - out into the corridor, then came back into the compartment and rolled the door shut.

"Exploding Snap, anyone?" said Luna, pulling out a pack of cards. The rest of the journey passed pleasantly enough; Harry wished it could have gone on all summer and that he would never arrive at King's Cross. However, as he had learned the hard way that time will not slow down when something unpleasant lies ahead, and all too soon, the Hogwarts Express was pulling in at platform nine and three-quarters. The usual confusion and noise filled the corridors as the students began to disembark and after watching Neville struggle over Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, he shrunk everyone's trunks, except for the twins, "Fred - George - wait a moment."

The twins turned. Harry unshrunk his trunk and drew out the small bag with a thousand galleons in winnings from the Triwizard Cup. "Take it," he said, and he thrust the sack into George's hands.

"What?" said Fred, looking flabbergasted.

"Take it," Harry repeated firmly. "I don't want it."

"You're mental," said George, trying to push it back at Harry.

"No, I'm not," said Harry. "You take it, and get inventing. It's for the joke shop."

"He is mental," Fred said, "But how did you know...."

Harry shrugged, "When you're friends with a Goblin Banker, and he finds out you two trying to take out loans by owl, that and you are both the biggest pranksters Hogwarts has seen in the past fifteen or so years..." Harry almost smirked. "If you don't take it, I'm throwing it down the drain or donating it," he added it as an afterthought, "I don't want it, and I don't need it. However, I could do with a few laughs. We could all do with a few laughs. I've got a feeling we're going to need them more than usual before long."

"Harry," said George weakly, weighing the money bag in his hands, "there's got to be a thousand Galleons in here."

"Yeah," said Harry, grinning. "Think how many Canary Creams or Bathtub Tidal Waves that is." The twins stared at him. "Just don't tell your mum where you got it... although she might not be so keen for you to join the Ministry anymore, come to think of it..."

"Harry," Fred began, but Harry pulled out his wand.

"Look," he said flatly, "Take it, or I'll hex you. I know some good ones now."

The twins filed out and he took a last look around the compartment and finally walked out, taking great care to step on Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, who were still lying on the floor, covered in hex marks. For the first time in months, Ron stepped up and blocked Harry's path, "Harry... can we... talk?"

He sized up Ron, carefully and noticed the wand sticking out of the side pocket of his jeans. "Not sure what we have to talk about," Harry said bluntly, "but I can think of a few things: Loyalty, for one.

Trust, another. Treachery, a third." His voice had dropped in to a growl. "What did you want to talk about?"

Ron hesitated, "I just wanted to... say I'm sorry, for not believing, for abandoning you, and for Hermione...She was my friend...."

Harry's eyes blazed, "Don't you ever say that name!" he snarled, and "I saw you at the Leaving Feast! I saw you refuse to stand and toast because your "friends" in Slytherin didn't!" Harry's finger slammed in to Ronald's chest; hard enough to drive the redhead back a step, "You have not been her friend this past year! Or mine! She didn't need me to prove anything Ron! She believed me, because I am Harry Potter, her friend since first year! Not "Boy-who-lived!" Not "Chosen One!" You never had the courage to stand by your friends!" the last cut like a knife in to Ron, "I will repeat what I told you and your mother, before the third task," Ron wisely kept his mouth shut, "What I told you once before - months ago! I have more money in my vault than I know what to do with! So again, I ask you, why the fuck I would risk life and limb for one thousand galleons? Fame and the spotlight?" he jerked his hand up to his scar, "I am fame's personal plaything! I'm the spotlight's eternal bitch!" It was not a moment of compassion for the Slytherin trio when he waved his Hermione's wand at them, "Enervate Plurios!"

"How the Sorting Hat cast you in Gryffindor, I'll never know!" roared Harry as weeks of bottled anger and fury erupted, "You did worse than stand idly by and do nothing! You joined the very people that made three years of your, mine and Hermione's life hell whenever they could!" The hexed threesome was stirring slightly, "And I heard about you and Daphne Greengrass! And Cho Chang! You made your bed in Slytherin House!" his voice dropped, "I could have forgiven that. My Hermione, could have forgiven that too. But what I cannot forgive, is that you went along like another one of Malfoy's thugs the night of the leaving feast, when you refused to stand and toast the fallen. You went along and made your bed amongst my enemies!" Harry took a deep breath, "I call you friend no more! I rescind the friendship between us! I break all bonds and ties with you! You made your bed! Sleep in it! Oath Breaker!"

Though Harry had shouted, rained accusations and even had solid proof to convict Ron, it was the last insult the rammed it home to Ron, that this friendship was shattered. The second youngest Weasley stared at his former best mate, whose voice had dropped,

wand grasped in a white-knuckle grip. The threatening growl of Alastor "Mad Eye" Moody had nothing on Harry as his wand rose and he stabbed Rob in the chest with the dragon heartstring and vine wood wand he had claimed as his own, "Tell your slithering friends that next year, the gloves are off. They step a millimeter out of line and what I will do them, let's just say magic won't be able to undo or grow back!"

Left to his thoughts for a long moment, Ron Weasley felt his feet go damp and looked down with a snarl of aggravation. Crookshanks had taken a moment to relieve himself, directly on Ron's boots. He snarled and kicked out. The cat leapt aside with a hiss and a flash of its claws slashed a long scratch wound across the boy's left ankle, "Crookshanks! Come!" barked Harry.

The cat gave Ron a last long, baleful glare, then trotted out after its new master, and then broke in to a run to catch up. Harry had stormed off the train and barely noticed the crowds of students as they parted around him the way the Red Sea had parted for Moses. Parents stared at him, some in awe, some in shock, and others in fear. He nodded curtly to his friends and passed through the barrier. There was nothing to explain. "Ah..." said George with a sage nod, "That confirms the cause of Harry's sudden ill temper..." Ron had appeared, supporting Draco who looked, slightly worse for wear with the footprints all over his robes.

Beyond the barrier, Uncle Vernon waited with Aunt Petunia and Dudley. They did not notice he was not pushing a trolley, or carrying a cage or that Hedwig was nowhere in sight. But then again, he doubted that they had even noticed him standing less than ten feet away. Harry eyed his relatives, and for the first time, wondered why he was going back to Privet Drive. There was nothing for him at No. 4, and in his current mood, he was more of a threat to them than anyone else...was. "Si vis Pacem, para Bellum," he said aloud, "If you want peace: Prepare for war."

Harry stalked up to his relatives, without so much as a hello, "Got things to take care of." That left all three Dursleys staring at him in shock, "Stay out of my way, and hopefully, I will not be around much during the summer."

Vernon Dursley gave Harry a once over and realized that the boy was different. Taller, stronger, filled out with muscle and a glint in his

eyes that made him nervous. Petunia was fanning herself with one hand, and using the other to restrain her husband for doing or saying anything unseemly. Harry Potter turned away from them, "I'll make my own way to Privet Drive – if I bother to drop by." Without waiting for an answer, he turned and plunged in to the crowd of emerging students and parents that had just stepped through the barrier. Cutting through that crowd, he slipped in to a group of muggles heading in the opposite direction.

Harry looked down at the cat alongside him, "Up!" The cat leapt in to Harry's arms, met his gaze and purred for a moment, "I miss her too," he whispered softly and he rubbed his head against Harry's chin.

Hedwig hooted gently and flapped her way down, sitting herself on Harry's opposite shoulder as far from Crookshanks as possible. Cat and owl eyed each other for a long moment, and came to some sort of agreement, "You two think you can get along?" Hedwig hooted. Crookshanks meowed, "I'll take that as yes."

They were not human. They were not exactly friends. Where Harry had adopted the former, the later had adopted him. Familiars could be as close to their chosen wizard or witch as family. Even closer.

Fuck his relatives.

They could look after themselves.